

Star Wars Genesis: Devouring the Snake's Tail

by Cyan

Category: Star Wars
Language: English
Status: In-Progress
Published: 2000-06-13 09:00:00
Updated: 2000-06-13 09:00:00
Packaged: 2016-04-27 20:09:25
Rating: T
Chapters: 1
Words: 53,155
Publisher: www.fanfiction.net
Summary: Part 3 of the Genesis series (please read Beginning's End and Revolt first)

Star Wars Genesis: Devouring the Snake's Tail

> <p> **Title:** _ Star Wars Genesis: Devouring the Snake's Tail_

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> Catagory: Series

> Keywords: luke, mara, cyan, genesis, chiss

> Spoilers: everything _except _ for the prequels and NJO

> Rating: R

> Summery: Â What little is left of Luke Skywalker's sanity is slipping away, and there's only one person who can help him. The one who started his trip into insanity in the first place. Leia Organa Solo.

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> Author's Note: Â This story would not have been as good if not for the faithful bata readings by my girl Ivy and all of the wonderful feedback from its readers. Â If you want to learn more about _ Genesis_ the series (the few parts that aren't here yet, anyway) and all the extras, head on over to my website at <http://www.hyperjump.net/cyan/genesis>

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> Chapter I<p>

Leia could see Mara turning and she knew as firmly as she had known anything else in her life that if Mara reached them, she would win this battle and Luke would slip away from Leia's grasp once more. Â As soon as Leia realized this, her actions became automatic, out of her control.Â Her blaster trained itself on Mara, deft to Han's demands to know what she was doing. Â The stormtroopers were dragging the last remaining rebel to the medical tent and Mara was momentarily distracted by the incident. Â Feeling a deep shudder go through her all the way down to her soul, Leia squeezed the trigger.

Everything was still happening in slow motion. Â The blaster bolt threw Mara back, her body falling at an impossibly slow pace.Â Han was crying out and running past Leia.Â She stood frozen in place as Han desperately tried to keep Mara from losing consciousness, the sand around her quickly becoming stained with red. Â She watched as Mara slowly closed her eyes, and the blaster slipped from Leia's numb grasp.Â Her legs could no longer support her and she sank to the sand, a pale hand fluttering to her throat.

_ What have you done? Â The words rolled continuously through her head, over and over. Â Her hand fell away from her neck to join its counterpart lying limply on her lap._

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And suddenly Han was with her again, shaking her gently to get her attention. Â "Leia?Â Leia! C'mon sweetheart, snap out of it."

"I killed her.Â I never meant to kill her, Han, I thought I had it on stun!" Leia began, her entire body beginning to tremble in reaction to what had just happened.

"Oh! Oh, no, no, she's not dead, Leia," Han said, brushing away the tears streaming down his wife's cheeks.Â "She lost consciousness, that's all.Â You hit her on the shoulder, punctured a lung, that's about the worst of it.Â The doc said she would be all right.Â Luke too."

"Luke . . ." Leia murmured, watching as the medics lifted his still prone body onto a stretcher.Â "How did this all go so bad?Â Oh, stars, Han, I could have killed them both!"

Han put his arms around her to help her stand on her wobbly legs. Â "But you didn't.Â What happened to Luke was an accident, and you were right, I didn't want to find out what Mara was going to do to us once she got past Kyp any more than you did."

Han steered Leia towards a transport that would take them back to Mos Eisley. Â As they went the medics rushed by with Mara's body laid out on a hover stretcher, her face deathly pale beneath her deep tan.

Leia closed her eyes against the sight, trying to ignore the fact that no matter what Han said, accident or not, this was still all her fault.

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Leia watched as the 2-1B droid helped Luke wash off the last lingering traces of bacta that clung to his body.Â He was unnaturally quiet, his expression lost.Â She stepped forward when the bacta was cleaned off, her hands half raised from her sides as she struggled against the impulse to immediately run and embrace him.Â The droid led Luke to her and he stopped, just staring at her silently for a long time.Â He opened his mouth as if to say something but stopped himself and looked away from his sister's hopeful expression.Â Then he looked back and tried to speak again, but gave up and dejectedly shuffled off to his bed.

G o o d Â I n t e n t i o n s

> <p class="MsoNormal"> Chapter II<p>

"That's all he does?" Mara asked, her voice weak and broken.

Han nodded slowly, shrugging.Â "He just sits in his room and ignores everything.Â He won't even eat.Â The doc's been giving him supplements but he can't live on them for the rest of his life."Â Han sighed and ran a hand through his hair.Â "The only rise we got out of him was when Olive came in.Â Even then, all he did was just look at him for a bit."

"Corran said Olive won't leave him alone," Mara commented, her voice even more defeated than before Han had come to see her.

"Yeah," Han smiled humorlessly.Â "He just sits right beside Luke and gives Leia the evil eye every time she enters the room."

"Good for him."

Mara sat back in her self-conforming chair and looked around.Â Since their rebellion had been fairly constrained, and given that the whole Tatooine water imports issue had become quite the popular debate throughout the New Republic, Mara and Luke were only placed under house arrest.Â Though technically that should have put them in the same apartment, the authorities had decided that that could be conducive to further insurrectionary action.

"We should have left him out there with you, but too many people were dying, it _couldn't go on," Han whispered.Â Suddenly he slammed his fist down on the coffee table so violently he made Mara jump and sit up in surprise.Â "Damn it!Â How could this happen to Luke?Â After all he's been through, _this is how he goes out?Â It's not right!"__

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"Of course it isn't right!" Mara responded, her voice becoming firm for the first time since that fated battle on the Dune Sea.Â "But what were you expecting? Life to be fair?Â When has life ever been fair to him?Â But the thing about Luke was he never let that stop him.Â And he won't now, he just needs a little more help than he used to."

Han scrubbed at his face with his hands and then gripped Mara's arm.

Â "I know.Â I just don't know what to do and I don't like being so damn helpless."

"I understand, Han, believe me," Mara said, smiling slightly. "Just be with him. Don't automatically side with Leia, because he won't trust you then. Just talk with him, even if he doesn't answer, just talk with him and get him to trust you again. He's afraid, Han, he's so afraid."

"Of what?"

"The silence," Mara responded, her eyes deepening with sympathy. "The never ending silence."

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"Say something!" Leia shouted, clenching her fists against her rising frustration. "Say something! Say anything! I don't care what, just tell me you're still alive in there!" She grabbed Luke's shirt and shook him violently from his seat. Olive snarled and swatted at her exposed arm from his perch. Leia cried out and backed away a step, not resisting when Han drew her away even further.

"Why don't you leave, sweetheart?" Han suggested gently when she had calmed down some. "Shaking him isn't going to solve anything."

Leia looked rebellious for a moment, and then she sighed and gave up. "You're right," she said, rubbing her red rimmed eyes. "You're right. I'm going to go back to our place and try and get some semblance of sleep."

"All right.â I'm gonna try some more. â He might respond better to me," Han said softly, kissing Leia on the forehead.â Leia nodded in grudging acceptance and quietly shuffled out of the room. â Taking a deep breath, Han walked over and sat down beside Olive, who had moved to the cushion beside Luke. â Han didn't try and get by the little dragon; he figured Luke would feel better with some protection.

"Hey, Luke," Han said when he couldn't think of anything better to say. "After spending about five minutes trying to think of an opening, he gave up and decided to try a different approach. "You know, the funniest thing happened the other day. You remember how you always said the phase converters were the only thing on the _Falcon that would never break? Well, you were wrong. I was just flying her around the other day to test the new sensor systemâ€"you know, that one I've been trying to get my hands on for about two years? Well, I finally got it. Anyway, I was doing some terrain flying, you know, to see how sensitive the sensors were, and I had to pull a sharp right 'cause this flag pole jumped right up out of nowhere. And _ boom, up goes the phase converter in flames. Blew itself right off the wall. Chewie caught himself on fire trying to fix it. He still has this bald spot on his shoulder. He's pretty unimpressed with that, but he said he wouldn't be so upset about it if we could figure out how it happenedâ€"_"

"It's because your phase converter's about twenty five years old and isn't compatible with the new information disks," Luke said softly. Â Han almost jumped off the couch when Luke started to speak. Â Luke continued, "I was supposed to remind you to replace it, but I got . . . sidetracked."

Han grinned proudly.Â He grabbed an untouched plate of tuber chips from the table and began too much absently. Â "Yeah, I remember now.Â I hated to give that thing up, its worked for so long. Â Wait, couldn't you fiddle with it? Â I thought those sky hoppers you used to fly around when you were a kid had a lot of problems with their phase converters. Â You would know more about them then I would."

Luke nodded, taking one of the tuber chips without thinking about what he was doing when Han offered.Â "I did have one, but I smashed it up taking it though Beggar's Canyon. Â You're right though, those things went though converters like you go though spare parts for the _Falcon .Â I might be able to jury rig something but I'd need to see the specs for the new sensor system."_

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"Sure," Han said cheerfully, instantly in a better mood than he had been for weeks.Â "I'll bring them with me tomorrow."

"That would be good," Luke said, his voice dying off as he turned away from Han, singling the end of the conversation. Â But Han didn't mind, Luke was eating the tuber chips without any further urging and he had sounded, at least for a little while, just like his old self.

"Leia?Â You're still up? Â I thought you said you were going to try and sleep," Han commented as he walked into their home.Â Leia looked up from where she had been reading in a self-conforming chair and smiled wanly at him.

"I couldn't relax," Leia explainedÂ "I figured reading the council's latest list of complaints would knock me right out.Â I guess not, though. Â But what has you so happy?Â Look at you, you look like you're about to burst!"

Han grinned and pulled Leia out of the chair and hugged her ecstatically. Â "I got Luke to talk.Â I mean, really talk.Â It wasn't a big long conversation, and it wasn't as if we talked about anything really important, but he sounded soâ€"soâ€"so normal!"

"He talked, Han?Â He really spoke?" Leia asked, urgently gripping his arms in her excitement.

"Yes sweetheart, we had a nice little conversation about the _Falcon, and he even ate something without any urging from me," Han told her, laughing at the excited expression on her face. Â "It wasn't much, but at least it's something!"_

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Leia's eyes lit up and she hugged him just as enthusiastically as he was hugging her.Â "Oh, Han, that's wonderful! Â He must be getting

better!Â Thank the Force, I didn't know what I was going to do if he didn't do _ something soon."_

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"Calm down, Leia," Han said, smoothing back her hair as he saw how upset she was getting.Â "Of course he got better.Â It's Luke! Â He can pull through anything.Â And with all of us helping him, how could he not?"

"I know, Han.Â It's just thatâ€"you know all the nightmares I've been having? Â Well, they're getting worse.Â And the person I keep seeing wondering around a tundra is looking more and more like Luke and he doesn't look well at all!" Â Leia stopped talking and ran her hand through her hair, which she had let hang long after she returned home. Â "But he's now better.Â And he'll keep getting better.Â It was just a dream and I don't have to worry about it." Â Leia compressed her lips and nodded more to convince herself than Han.Â

Han raised an eyebrow and forced her to meet his eyes. Â He thought about adding that her dreams had sounded like a vision to both of them, and that all of Mara's visions had come true so far, but thought better of it.Â If they continued and if Leia could get something from them, then she would know when to act. Â For now, it was just one less thing for her to worry about. Â "That must be it, love, just a dream. Â And speaking of which, let's try and go to bed. Â Maybe now you'll be able to sleep."

Leia smiled genuinely and walked with him to their room.

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"You can't put the connector through the ventral port," Han argued with Luke the next day.Â They were sitting cross-legged on the floor as they looked at the plastifilm copy of the sensor system and phase converter specs.Â Luke was absently munching on a piece of Grundar jerky, holding it in his teeth as he turned the phase converter specs sideways as he tried to figure them out. Â "The port's got a positive charge, it'll set off the coolant conductor."

"No it won't.Â You got the new conductor didn't you?Â Well, then, it's insulated 'cause the last module kept catching the new phase converters on fire too. Â That's how they fixed it.Â Hell, Han, did you even consult the guide when you were installing the bloody sensor system?" Luke exclaimed in amazement as he grabbed a data pad with the updated technical readout of the _ Falcon.Â "Never mind, I can tell you didn't.Â What else was I expecting?"_

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Han shrugged.Â "I've been working on ships way longer than the people who designed that thing."

"That's because the species that designed it only has a ten year life span. Â Well, I suppose you couldn't possibly follow the instructions. Â The _Falcon has so many repaired systems and crossed wires that the instructions wouldn't even apply to most of her," Luke commented, turning the phase converter specs upside down and then

nodding as he finally found what he was looking for._

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He narrowed his eyes at Luke. "Why do you always do that?"

"Do what?"

"Turn the specs upside down or sideways or backwards before you can find what you're looking for?" Han demanded.

Luke looked up from the specs and grinned at his brother-in-law after popping another piece of jerky into his mouth. "Han, what position do we usually wind up in when we're fixing the _ Falcon?"_

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"Huh? Oh, upside down or sideways or backwards. I got ya," Han said, promptly picking up the sensor system specs and turning them upside down. "Hey! I finally found that relay conduit."

"See? It works," Luke said triumphantly. He turned it sideways again and then squinted at it. "What in the void is a 'physical self repairing mechanism'?"

"Fancy title for a built in hydrospanner."

"Ah, of course. Does it actually work?" Luke asked.

Han shook his head. "Naw. It's just one of those gadgets they put in there to impress the people who don't know what they're doing." Luke nodded, not surprised and started to chew on another piece of Grundar jerky.

Thus things continued in that fashion. They spent almost a week discussing how to fix the phase converter, even though they were both aware that it should only have taken them a day or two. Luke stoutly refused to speak with anyone else who came in, and Han stoutly refused to press him on the subject. So they spent almost all their time together. Eventually they both decided they had beaten the phase converter issue to death and just gave up any pretence of being productive and started to chat. Moreover Han found that he was really starting to enjoy himself. It wasn't just as if Luke was normal, it was as if the last fifteen years hadn't happened. They were talking about ships and maneuvers and the latest models and how to fix this and how to make that more efficient. They were talking just like they had during the Rebellion. It was probably nostalgia, or he was getting old, but Han liked it anyway. He was dead tired of talking about galactic politics and virtuous ethical decisions that would effect billions. It was then that Han decided that talking about ships and flying wasn't just a "guy thing"; it was therapeutic.

But all good things must come to an end. They had just finished a vigorous argument about which was the best blockade runner model on the market when Luke suddenly got a thoughtful expression on his face that Han had seen appear more and more often lately. He looked at Han and seemed as though he was about to say something, then sighed and leaned back against the couch from his seat on the floor. Han

was beside him and he put down the information data pad they were using to settle the argument to regard his friend. "Luke realized Han was looking at him and started to fiddle with the hem of his shirt.

"Alright, Kid, what is it?" "You're trying to get something out, so say it." "And if it's about my taste in bulk fighters than I already know you think mine is terrible, but make the insult creative this time," Han said, grinning to take the sting out of his words.

Luke laughed, though he sounded distracted. "It's not that. I just . . . never mind. I don't want to know. It's stupid for me to ask, it'll only lead to trouble."

"You wouldn't have asked if you didn't want to know, Kid," Han said gently, smiling encouragingly. "C'mon, it's me. You can ask me anything."

Luke licked his lips, his expression almost fearful as he finally asked, "Han . . . can you tell me what happened at the banquet?" "I don't—I can't remember and I—I think I hurt you. I know I hurt Karrde, and Leia, but I can't remember how much or why." "I just—" Luke stopped and rubbed his eyes, "all I can remember is rage."

Han sighed in resignation. He knew this wouldn't last forever, but he still hated to have it end. "I would say that about sums it all up. You went up to the balcony and Leia went after you to talk or something. Next thing I saw was you throw Leia through the doors. Me, Mara and Karrde went up to stop you." Han paused. Luke was looking at him with an unreadable expression on his face, though Han thought he could see the hint of something just waiting to be released. Han shifted so he could completely face his best friend and grabbed Luke's shoulder to make him look him in the eye. "You were out of your mind. I think Leia said something about Cyan that set you off. It probably was the chemical imbalance the doc says you have that caused it, which would explain why you don't remember."

"Stop it, Han," Luke interrupted, his voice barely above a whisper. "What did I do?"

Han licked his dry lips and finally answered, "I reached you first. I tried to stop you so you threw me down the stairs." Luke closed his eyes, the memories slowly returning as Han spoke. Han continued right on until the terrible scene at the hanger.

When he was finished, Luke opened his eyes and looked at Han. "What happened to Karrde?" "I haven't seen him at all and—and I should have by now."

"Karrde . . . Karrde hit his head really hard when he fell down the stairs. He . . . hasn't woken up yet," Han told him hesitantly.

Luke whispered a broken oath and let his head fall into his hands as if the weight of what he had done was too much for him to bear. "By the Great Black Void, what am I becoming?" The words came out as a wretched plea as he brought his knees up and curled inward as if to escape his actions.

"Hey, look, Kid, you're not becoming _ anything.Â That wasn't even really you.Â You weren't in control there at all.Â Luke? Â C'mon, Luke," Han said as he tried to coax Luke out of his ball. Â He gently forced his brother's hands away and lifted his tear-streaked face to regard him.Â "_ You weren't in control.Â You couldn't be.Â You physically couldn't be, your brain has something wrong with it that makes it impossible."__

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"I could have killed Karrde.Â I could have killed you or Mara.Â What would have happened if Mara hadn't caught you?Â You'd be the one in the coma!Â How could I let myself do that to you?Â To the people I love the most in all the universe?" Luke demanded, his self-deprecating behavior increasing.Â He felt his anger rising as well, though he did not know why.

"The docâ€™" Han began.

Luke made a cutting motion with his hand, half-sitting up as his fury rose. Â "Screw the doctors!Â They don't know, how can they know?Â They believe what Leia tells them.Â _ Lies, all lies.Â She said it herself. Â I remember now, I remember what she said. Â She admitted it then, she fucking admitted that she stuck him in the carbonite!Â She killed him . . .my sister killed him . . ." His fury died just as suddenly as it had begun, cold and empty.Â He sobbed and slumped forward; Han caught his shuttering body and hugged him close. Â Han felt his own tears sting his eyes as the horrible truth finally became indisputable to him.Â All the little hints and clues he'd turned a blind eye too because he refused to believe.Â The excuses and rationalization he had come up with then sounded so hollow in his ears now. Â There was no denying it anymore, Leia had done it, she had really done it.Â The unthinkable thing Han had thought she could never have done in a million years, and she had done it._

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"I know, Luke, I know," Han said, his voice becoming broken as well. Â "It's hard to believe, but you can't let it consume you. Â You gotta move on.Â I miss Cyan too, not as much as you, I couldn't possibly miss him as much as you do, but you can't let that be the focus of your life. Â You still have all of us.Â You have me, Maraâ€™"

"But I don't have Mara," Luke interrupted, drawing back slightly. Â "They won't let me see her.Â I love her, and I love you too, but you can't fill what was taken away from me.Â I see it every night, every day, every second.Â In the back of my mind, gnawing at my every thought and emotion." Â Han embraced him again in a mute reminder that he was still there. Â Mara was right, Han thought to himself, when Luke lets go he lets go in a big way.Â Eventually Han had to support Luke as he pulled him to his bed, tugging the covers up when Luke almost immediately drifted off into a fitful sleep. Then Han sank down to the floor, biting his lip as his own emotions threatened to overwhelm him.

Han sat at his kitchen table, gazing at his wife in puzzlement. He had spent the last couple of days wrestling over whether or not he should confront her, and was still undecided, but her latest announcement had driven that dilemma from his mind and produced a whole new one. "Explain to me again why we're taking Luke to Konstan Prime?"

"There's too many reminders here. He keeps getting reminded of what happened and he can't move beyond it. If we move him away from here, he might be able to get past everything and get some perspective," Leia explained.

"Get past everything?" Han asked, amazed. "I don't think this is the kind of thing you just 'get past'."

"I didn't mean it that way. I know this will take a long time, but we should do everything we can to help him along and I think this is it. I just about have the Tatooine government talked into dropping the house arrest. Mara's coming too and maybe we can get her in there to see him." Leia smiled hesitantly at the dower expression on Han's face as he mulled this new information over. He was so distant the last few days, Leia mused, and maybe if they were away, she could find out what was bothering him while they were at it. "I've almost got things fixed."

Han looked up at her, and irrational surge of anger threatening to burst out. "There's not much you can ever do to fix things," he muttered, rising from the table and his half-eaten breakfast. Leia looked up at him, surprised at his sudden outburst. "I'm going over to Luke's. I'll tell him what's going on."

Han left his house swiftly before Leia could stop him and before he could say something else he would regret later. He made his way to Luke's apartment and let himself in. He found Luke sitting on the couch, absently stroking Olive as he stared off into nothingness. He looked at Han when he entered and frowned, immediately on guard. "What is it?"

"You're getting moved," Han explained.

"Moved?" Luke asked, perplexed. "What are you talking about?"

Han sighed and walked over, plopping down in a chair. "Leia's taking you to Konstan Prime 'cause she thinks you'll feel better if you get away from here. Wants you to get some 'perspective'."

"She's grasping at straws," Luke commented, setting back. "I suppose this eliminates any chance I have of seeing Mara."

"Not at all. Leia's actually working on it and has them talked into letting Mara at least come with us, if not stay with us. I'm sure you'll see her soon, Kid," Han said, trying to keep his current bad mood from showing on his face.

But Luke saw it. "What's wrong with you?"

"The thing that seems to be wrong with everyone these days. Leia," Han growled.

"Uncalled for displays of anger directed at that particular person are my job, Han," Luke said, smiling slightly. "So you'd better have a good reason for moving onto my territory."

Han laughed softly, his bad mood evaporating. "If Luke could joke, so could he. "Well, I wouldn't want to do that. But tell me, Kid, what do you think of her latest idea? I mean, if you really don't want to, than I'm sure I can convince her to not take you there."

"No," Luke shook his head, watching his brother closely. "I really couldn't care less. Besides, I think you two have enough between you right now."

"What? You're pushing for Leia's happiness now?" Han asked, incredulous.

Luke shook his head again, still watching him. "No, yours. You still love her and I really can't get any . . . hmm, perspective on the situation right now. It's your choice, Han, I don't want to influence you either way."

The move went without incident, which was probably the part that bothered Leia the most. Luke withdrew into his own little world and stayed that way until he reached his new room on Konstan Prime. They flew low over the crystalline landscape when they arrived, the rose colored spikes rising majestically into the air. They kept Mara and Luke in different parts of the shuttle, but the whole way there Leia could see Luke's eyes trained on the door that lead to her, even though he hadn't been told which part of the shuttle she was in.

Despite Leia's best hopes, things went exactly the same once they had landed. Luke ignored everyone except Han, and Han would not reveal what they talked about. Leia was also becoming increasingly worried about her husband. He spent almost all his time with Luke, and when he finally did come home, he barely spoke to her at all. She tried to broach the subject most every day, but Han stubbornly refused to admit anything was wrong.

Mara wasn't too pleased with the whole situation either. She spent most of her days pacing her room, trying not to worry herself to death. Besides that she sparred with Corran when he found the time to come down, and tried not to go insane from frustration and boredom.

"Whoa! Ease off, Mara! We're sparring, not trying to kill each other," Corran commented when Mara's lightsaber almost sliced off a good chunk of his ear.

Mara snorted. "They're on low power, it'll just sting a little if they hit."

"I know, I just don't like any kind of energy beam hitting me in the head. I like it too much," Corran answered, acting wounded.

Mara just shrugged and turned off her own lightsaber. "Well, it's not as if you use it very much, being a pilot and all."

"Geez, what crawled up your ass?" Corran asked, stunned by her sudden offensive manner.

"Your mother."

Corran crossed his arms and glared at her. "Alright, now you're just taking cheap shots. What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," Mara growled, slumping into a chair and staring at the floor as if it was offending her too.

Corran grunted. "Yeah, right. You know, the last time you were this bitchy was when you were pregnant. If I didn't know better I . . ." Corran's voice trailed off when Mara looked up at him with a bitter half smile. "You're pregnant, aren't you?" Corran asked, though he already knew the answer.

"Yep. Great timing, huh?" Mara said sardonically.

"Pregnancies rarely come when you _want them too," Corran commented dryly. "How far along?"_

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"Two months. The doctors checked me out the other day and say they can't find any complications at the moment, but that could change at any time," Mara added, running her hands through her still blue hair. She started to brush it behind her ears then stopped herself; she didn't even have the long bangs anymore, she'd cut them off at the first chance. She glanced at a mirror on a wall and saw herself hunched in a chair, pale skinned with dark circles under her eyes. Her hair was scraggly from her recent exertion; sweat made it dark and curly. She could see the sharp lines of bitterness returning to her face, lines that had eased when she had realized she loved Luke. "I have to see him, Corran. I've got to see Luke and tell him." She sighed and let her face fall into her hands. "But there's no chance they'll let me see him. Not any time soon. I don't care how hard Leia argues."

Corran regarded her thoughtfully for a moment and then crouched down beside her, whispering softly. "Maybe there is a way."

Leia ripped her arm away from Han's grasp and glared at her husband angrily. "Why can't I see him?" she demanded.

"Because," Han said, glancing nervously at the guards in front of Luke's room, "he doesn't want to see you. We brought him here to _reduce his stress level, not rise it."_

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"You can't predict how he'll react to just seeing me! I won't yell at him or something. Hell, if you insist I won't even mention Cyan. And you'll be in there with me! He trusts you." Leia smiled reassuringly and gripped Han's arm. "Why don't you trust me?"

Han stared at her long and hard before answering, his voice heavy with betrayal, "Because you don't trust me. You lied to me and you hurt Luke terribly and then covered up what you'd done like some kind

of criminal!"

"What?Â What are you talking about?" Leia asked, fear beginning to edge its way into her voice.

"Luke remembers what happened at the banquet now. Â All he needed was for me to remind him and he remembered everything. Â Including what you said to him.Â I never, even in my deepest moments of doubt, thought that you were capable of doing what everyone else has been saying you did. Â But . . ." Han's voice broke off, he couldn't go on. Â Now that he had gotten everything out, he felt strangely drained, empty.Â The expression on Leia's face was too much and he turned away.Â The feelings of pity and anger warred within him and he struggled with which one to obey.

Leia licked her lips, seeing the struggle on Han's face. Â She touched his arm and he flinched, almost drawing away from her. Â Leia let her hand fall and said in a voice thick with determination, "I'm going in there, I'm going to talk with Luke, and we're going to settle this.Â This is the end, Han, no matter what."

"What do you mean?" Now it was Han's turn to be wary.

"A dream. Â It wasn't the same as the one I've been having, it . . . it didn't really show me anything; it was more like feelings. Â I can feel the climax coming," Leia said, a small smile tugging at the corner of her mouth.Â "This had to stop sometime."

She slipped past her husband and approached Luke's door. Â She turned back just in time to see him slump against the wall, letting his head rest against it as if he couldn't bear the weight anymore. Â Leia started to go to him but Han moved away with a gusty sigh. Â "I guess you can't stop fate," he said softly. Â Leia looked at him steadily.Â She wanted to say she was sorry, she wanted to explain why, she wanted to tell him what had really happened.Â But so much depended on her silence . . . Leia looked away and walked through the door.

Luke started in surprise when he first saw Leia enter. Â His gaze flickered to Han and a crease appeared between his raised eyebrows when he saw his brother's expression. Â Leia walked to the centre of the small living room and gave Luke a small smile.Â He was staring at her with wide eyes, half raised off the couch as if he would have run, reminding Leia very much of a frightened pray animal. Â _Much as he probably sees me as the predator, Leia commented to herself. Â Thinking of this, Leia decided to treat Luke just as he seemed. Â She crouched on the floor so that she was looking up at him instead of looking down at him, and compressed her body. Â She kept her smile small, not overly ecstatic, but not emotionless. Â Luke watched her without moving, not even twitching a muscle._

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"Hello, Luke," Leia said, keeping her voice low, but not whispering. Â "I just thought I'd drop in and see how you're doing. Â I know you've been spending an awful lot of time with Han but I wanted to see how you were doing myself." Â Leia kept her voice at the same level, like a light conversation. Â She remember what Han had told her about how he got Luke to respond to her so she made sure there was no pressure on him to respond this time. Â She was venturing

everything, he was venturing nothing. ^ Luke stared at her still, but slowly sat back down, though his body was tense, ready to flee at the slightest threat. ^ Leia considered sitting on the couch with him but thought better of it. ^ _ Don't push your luck!_

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"I . . . I know you're still angry at me, and I can understand that, believe me.^ I know what I did seems very horrible but I had lots of reasons^€"" Leia said, a quiver finding its way unbidden into her voice.

"Then what were they?"

Now it was Leia's turn to jump.^ Luke had spoken naught but a whisper though the sound cut through the room like a knife.^ Unfortunately, his question left her at a loss to answer.^ How did she tell him without ruining everything? ^ How did she tell him without undoing all of what her lies were meant to do?

Leia brought her fingers to her mouth and answered cautiously, "Sometimes something seems so good, we can't see past it to what is real. ^ Sometimes we do see it, but we don't want to let go of it so we ignore the bad parts.^ Everyone is guilty of this whether we like to admit it or not, or if we are even aware that we have done it.^ It's easy to be blind to darkness when the light is so bright."

The skin around Luke's eyes tightened; the first signs of his anger. ^ "So . . . you saw what no one else saw? ^ Even though you are one of the most under-trained in the Force, and knew Cyan the least of anyone, you could see what he really was?" ^ He did not raise his voice, he kept it soft; he didn't need to raise it, his eyes spoke volumes.

"I'm a politician, Luke," Leia said, shrugging.^ "It's my job to figure out if people are being truthful or not. ^ I didn't get to my position by being bad at that. ^ Hell, having that skill is the only way to survive on the council."

"And you think, sister dear, that I don't have the same skill? ^ Don't you think I need to know exactly what my students are like as soon as possible?^ You fail in this regard and you lose a deal, have a little bit of power wrestled away that you quickly regain.^ I fail in this regard and an innocent soul is lost to darkness. ^ Yes, I was injured.^ _ Yes, I was drugged.^ But the Force has never failed me before and I do not think it will start now!" ^ Luke's voice started at the same soft whisper, but rose and rose as his fury rose until he was on his feet shouting. ^ He took a menacing step towards her and Leia was forcibly reminded of the scene on the balcony.^ Han rushed from behind the couch and grabbed Luke's arm to stop his advance._

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Leia stood back up and forced herself to stay calm.^ He doesn't mean to be like this, Leia reminded herself sternly. ^ He can't help it.^ You got no more than you expected; you pushed, and he pushed back. ^ Leia regarded him carefully and saw through his anger to his underlying fear.^ Leia stretched out through the bond that held sister and brother together still to see what was really frightening

him.Â Alone! Â He was so alone! Leia almost shuttered as the feeling washed over her.Â She had never felt anything like it before; not even when she thought she had lost him, lost Han or anyone else had she been so afraid of being alone. Â Why?Â Why did losing Cyan, who he had known for such a short time, making him feel this way? Â

_ Because even in the beginning they were destined to be together, as they were destined to be together in the end.Â The only other soul to compare to that is Mara, and because of you, she is lost to him as well. It took every part of Leia's control to keep from crying out at the sound of that voice.Â Who was it? Â It was so musical, so beautiful, and so familiar. Â And then it hit her with the force of a physical blow. Â The Mother Dragon.Â Even from across the galaxy, the Mother Dragon could reach her, could see into her soul and speak to her.Â The sheer amount of power that must take struck a feeling of deep and terrible dread into Leia's heart.Â It also started the first cracks in beliefs she had clung to for so long. Â And as she looked into Luke's eyes, eyes that were so revolted with the sight before them they could view it no longer and turned away in disgust and disappointment, Leia felt the crack widen until it was large enough for the waters of truth to slowly pour through._

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"I never said the Force failed you," Leia said, struggling to keep the turmoil in her soul from showing on her face.Â Her gaze flickered to Han and she knew he saw her struggle as plainly as if it was written on her face.Â Luke would have seen it too had he the strength to look upon her. Â "But maybe, just maybe, you failed yourself. Â And maybe Cyan failed you too.Â He saw what he could have, and it was too much and the darkness took over him, and by then it was too late.Â You thought you could trust him, and when you first joined, I honestly think you could have.Â But temptation was too much for a creature spawned of darkness, and all Cyan could do was give in to his natural instincts."Â Even as she said the words, they rang hollow in her own mind. Â She could see Han shaking his head; he too was unable to look at her anymore.Â But Luke heard the words, though it seemed as if he was no longer listening. Â He was lost and no one was there to help him. Â He looked at Han and he seemed so distant, so unfamiliar. Â He turned back to Leia and she was a stranger looking at him with dull, grief filled eyes riddled with self-doubt.

_ Run! The beautiful, musical voice came to him.Â A voice he recognized so well!Â It was Her, the one that gave life to Cyan, the one that gave him that wonderful, fleeting joy that was cut tragically short.Â The voice that had whispered sweet reassurances as the two became one, as the Son of Suns joined with The Blue. _ Run, it whispered again, _run like the winds you once soared on!Â Run like the river of life from which we sprang! Â Run with the fleet footedness of the soul to the one who waits for you.Â Run to the crystal mountains. Â Run through the shards of rose.Â Run to the edge of the river of life and plunge in, then all will be made as clear as its watery depths.____

With a wild cry that caught both his brother and sister off guard, Luke broke away from Han's grip on his arm and bolted for the door.

^ It was unlocked so that Han and Leia could enter, and the guards could rush in if need be.^ It opened at his touch as he heard Han shout behind him. ^ The guards turned, bringing their weapons to bear, but Luke shoved them against the opposite wall impatiently. ^ The Force flowed through him, gone was the pain, washed away by that musical voice.^ He ran down the hall, mindless of those that tried to stop him. ^ He heard only one thing, heeded only one voice.

_ Run to the crystal mountains.^ Run through the shards of rose . . .
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On the other side of the building, nothing seemed amiss. ^ The two guards stood in front of Mara Jade-Skywalker's room, bored and uninterested in their duty.^ Everyone knew she and her husband were getting off. ^ No way was the President of the New Republic going to let her brother and sister-in-law go to jail, and most of the public followed her view. ^ These two had saved the galaxy more than once, what was one little infringement, especially for the good and virtuous cause they had chosen?

One of the guards spotted two people walking casually down the hallway. ^ One was dressed in the uniform of a pilot, the emblem of Rogue Squadron stitched on his left shoulder.^ Beside him, with her arm hooked through his, strode a strikingly beautiful woman with an intricately patterned shawl wrapped around her hair. ^ But even as the guard thought this, he saw the look in her eyes, the look of one who had been around the galaxy more than a few times.

"Good morning Captain Horn, Madam Terrik-Horn," the guard said graciously, handing them a data pad he always kept in his pocket. ^ He saw the X-Wing pilot press his thumbprint in the appropriate place, and then his wife did the same.^ The guard opened the door and allowed them to enter. ^ "Enjoy your visit," he added pleasantly as the couple passed.

Mirax Terrik-Horn turned to regard the guard with a smile and a gaze as sharp as a blaster bolt.^ "Oh, we will, thank you."^ The guard thought there was something odd about her expression but before he could ask what she meant the door shut behind them, forestalling any questions. ^ The guard shrugged it off.^ Probably nothing.^ It wasn't as if they were going to try and break her out or anything.

Therefore, when they emerged a half-hour later, the guard said nothing as the two walked past down the hall.^ If he thought it odd that Terrik-Horn kept her face pressed near her husband's and whispered something into his ear^"covering her mouth and thus half her face in the process^"the guard did not indicate it. ^ He did notice, as they walked away down the hall, that the way the light hit the small tendrils of her hair escaping her shawl seemed to turn them the most lovely shade of blue . . .

They rounded the corner and it was everything Mara could do to keep from bursting out laughing.^ "You were right, Corran, that was dreadfully easy."

"I know," Corran said with a grim smile.^ "Just imagine if you were actually a threat."

"That's not a fun thought at all," Mara said.

Corran shrugged. "At least they're a little more observant at Luke's door. I hope I can alter their minds enough to get in."

"We can still go back if you're having second thoughts," Mara said gently. "I don't want you getting into trouble for this."

"No, I said I was going to help you and I'm sticking to it. Besides, if I told Whistler that he hacked into the city's central computer and put that looping film of you reading a data pad in there for nothing, I'll never hear the end of it," Corran commented dryly.

They went the rest of the way in silence, fearing that someone would overhear them talking. They reached the corridor leading to Luke's room just in time to see him go through the doors and throw the two guards against the wall with enough force to knock them out.

"Luke!" Mara cried, taking a step towards him.

Luke turned and looked at her without recognition. His lips moved and Mara just managed to hear what he said. "Run to the crystal mountains, run through the shards of rose . . ." With that he turned around and ran down the hallway. Corran and Mara traded confused expressions and then, with a shrug, ran off after him.

It was then that Corran heard a muffled curse and pelting footsteps behind them. He looked over his shoulder and saw Han running as if his life depended on it.

"What in the black void happened?" Corran demanded, slowing his pace so that Han could catch up to him.

Han shook his head, gasping for air. "Don't know. Leia was talking to him, pissed him off and then he just went nuts, talking about mountains and roses and stuff."

"Where's he going?" Corran asked, his breath coming quick as they attempted to follow Luke's insane path through the building. Mara drew a little closer to Luke, her speed born of a kind of desperation.

"I don't know," Han said, puffing just as hard as Corran was. Then he frowned. "Wait a minute! How is Mara out of her room?"

"Um . . . well . . . I guess . . . congratulations . . . are in order . . ." Corran spoke in between gasps of air as they finally reached the street. Luke had paused at the threshold, took one look at the sky, and ran left. "You're going . . . to be an . . . uncle . . . again . . ."

Han looked at him in shock and then understood, quickly piecing things together as they sped down the road. Mara wasn't even thinking about her impending second motherhood as she followed Luke with all the strength in her limbs. She saw him stop and the end of the street, everything on it carefully nurtured from the crystals that grew from the very bones of Konstan Prime. There were no trees, there were no plants. Not in this part of the world.

Everything here was imported or grown in special warehouses. ^ Luke stopped at the end of the orderly crystal houses, and the orderly crystal spikes that arched up out of the crystal sidewalks as trees or shrubs would in any other place.^ Luke looked beyond it to the great peaks beyond.^ And then Mara remembered his confused words in the hallway, and knew his destination.

_ Run to the crystal mountains . . . _

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Luke could see the jagged finger reaching towards the false dawn, reaching for that which they could never grasp.^ He felt his spirits rise.^ He knew! ^ He knew where he was supposed to go. ^ He ran on, unaware that he was being followed, unaware of the puzzled and alarmed glances people shot his way as he ran past. ^ He ran and he knew he would not tire. ^ The Force flowed around him like a lover's caress, like a mother's smile, drawing him onward.^ Air flowed into his lungs like the purest water, he felt his body moving with the grace and ease of a dragon in flight.

He reached the bottom and paused.^ He knew it must have taken him a long time to run from the city to there, but it felt like an instant.^ He looked ahead of him, for there were several paths that lead into the mountains. ^ Then he saw, on the side of a trail, small sprouts of newly formed crystals, looking very much like shattered flowers.

_ Run through the shards of rose . . . _

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He ran up the path, climbing it as easily as if he had been running down a steep hill.^ He followed the path, and even when pieces of the weak crystalline flowers broke off and slipped beneath his feet and he thought for sure he must stumble and fall, his foot would land firmly on the mountain side, and he would keep climbing. ^ Higher and higher until the air was thin. ^ But still, he felt no discomfort.

He reached the end of the trail, and indeed, he could run no further for it dropped off in a deep ravine.^ But then he looked over the side and caught his breath, mesmerized by the clear blue river, its surface marred only by pink tinted foam flowing by.

Run to the edge of the river of life and plunge in, and all will be made as clear as its watery depths . . .

Mara's lungs burned.^ Every step was agony.^ But she pressed her body forward, pressed the air down her lungs, using more of the Force than she had in years. ^ She saw Luke running ahead, never seeming to tire, and always drawing further and further away.^ She lost sight of him right at the base of the mountain. ^ Then she stopped, seeing the different paths and she saw the one with the flowering crystal remembered the second phrase Luke had uttered in the hall.^ Breathing a sigh of relief, she followed it upwards.

The climb was agony, but she pressed onward, knowing in her heart that if she stopped, if she paused to rest, she would never see Luke in this world again.^ Soon all those thoughts left her head.^ It

took every bit of energy and will just to put one leg in front of the other. Â She reached the top of the trail and crashed into a wall when the path turned sharply, so fast was she running, so dulled were her senses. Â She felt a sharp spike slice her shoulder but she ignored the pain, for there he was, standing on the edge, a look of hope and peace coming over his face.Â

Realizing what he was about to do, she ran to the edge. Â But she couldn't move fast enough, her legs were like lead. Â She let out an inarticulate scream and Luke stopped, turned to look at her, and smiled the smile of one who has reached the end of a long journey and is finally home.Â He spread his arms, in farewell, or thanks, she would never be sure, and let himself fall off the edge.

Mara did not stop, she saw the flash of water, the spray of foam down below and without hesitation, leaped off the edge after him.

Corran and Han reached the precipice just as the two falling bodies were halfway down.Â Â Â They heard a savage cry behind them of such magnitude Corran almost drew his lightsaber. Â They saw Leia running towards the edge, the hem of her dress in tatters from the jagged crystal.Â Han caught her as she charged past, fearing she too would go willingly over the cliff. Â Leia screamed and fought against him, then she looked up and saw the tears running down his cheeks and she collapsed in his arms, sobbing bitterly.

Corran kept his eyes on the river, watching as the two people he had come to love and respect plunged into its cold embrace. Â He drew on the Force and held onto their essences, trying to see them in the foaming waves.Â He saw Mara reach for something and then dive under, coming up with a body in her arms and then she was dragged under again. Â Suddenly Corran felt Luke's life force slip away from his grasp. Â He tried desperately to find it again and realized that that may well be impossible.

Then he saw Mara climb out of the water onto a narrow ledge and slump against the ground.

Mara felt the chill waters close around her, fingers of pain laced through her body, the cold was like the cold of death. Â She felt something shatter when she impacted, a rib perhaps, or maybe it was her hip, she was so instantly numbed with cold she could not tell.Â She forced her eyes open, and found her view was not the hazy vista she had come to expect beneath the waves, but was as clear as a winter morning.

Abruptly she saw it; a flash of black cloth, a tanned hand, a small cloud of red expanding in the water around it.Â She fought her way to the surface, took a gulp of air, and then dove back under.Â She found him quicklyâ€”she wrapped her arms around him and felt him instinctively return the embrace. Â She kicked with all her might and won her way to the surface once more, sucking in air.Â She had just emptied her lungs when she felt the undercurrent drag them down once again. Â Luke was torn from her grasp, spikes of crystal ripped at their flesh.Â She saw Luke sweep even deeper and then another cloud of red, this one much bigger than the last, exploded up from the depths like some ghastly bomb. Â Mara could feel his life force ebb until she could no longer even find its echo for the terrible burning in her lungs. Â She somehow managed to make it above the water again and saw that she was near the ledge.Â She grabbed onto

it as she was swept past.Â Pulling her aching body out of the water she just lay against the rose crystal, shuttering and sobbing and gasping for air.

She felt strong arms lift her and she look up and saw green eyes rimmed with tears.Â "Mara, oh, Mara . . ." Corran held her close as she sobbed into his shoulder until it was almost as wet as she was.

Mara cried until she had no more strength left, until she had no more tears left, and then she just huddled against Corran, shuddering and shivering. Â Surprisingly she felt a familiar presence behind her she normally wouldn't have given enough credit to show. Â Sitting up, keeping her eyes averted, Mara attempted to wipe her face off with her hands.Â She looked down on the right one and was stunned to see it stained with blood, realizing quite belatedly that she had sliced her cheek on one of the rocks in the river.Â She couldn't even feel it. Â She stood with Corran's help; he was gazing at her with an expression of sympathy mixed with worry.Â Mara took a deep breath, gave him a brave smile, and when she felt collected enough she turned around and faced Leia.

"Will you tell me now?" Mara asked, walking slowly forward, her legs feeling decidedly unsteady.Â "Will you tell me your big secret that you've been keeping for the fate of us all. Â I mean, since we all know it was only for _ Luke's sake, I think we can safely say he's not going to be too concerned about it now."Â Her words were shaky with grief but firm.Â There would be no more lies now._

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Leia was slumped against a wall, staring out at everyone there with haunted eyes that were sunken into her face.Â She saw Mara's expression; she saw the look in her eyes, and the tears mingled with the unnoticed blood.Â She tried to speak but her voice failed her.Â She lowered her head and drew a shuttering breath.

Suddenly Mara couldn't take it anymore.Â She didn't care what happened to Leia, she didn't care if Han still loved her, if she died, if she had finally seen the truth, or anything else. Â With a lightening move that caught even Mara off guard, she gripped Leia's shirt and slammed her against the wall. Â Leia cried out and squirmed as the needle sharp edges dug into her back.

"Tell me!" Mara shrieked.Â Han grabbed her, trying to restrain her, but Mara refused to relinquish her grip. Â "Tell me you bitch!Â Stop fucking hiding!Â He dead, god damnit! Â What does it matter any more, just tell me!"

Leia stared at Mara, and felt the crack in her soul widen until it was a great fissure and the waters were cascading through like a tidal wave. Â So profound was this realization that Mara released her hold, seeing the truth in Leia's eyes.

"Cyan's alive."

> <p class="MsoNormal"> Chapter IV<p>

"What?"

The soft exclamation was like a small drop falling into a still pool of water rippling outwards until everyone there was shaken out of his or her stunned silence.Â Mara took a step nearer to Leia, and Han was too weak with shock to stop her.Â Mara lifted Leia's chin up and jade eyes met almond.Â Mara's thumb pressed painfully into Leia's chin but she made no sound, she couldn't have even if she had wanted to.Â "What did you just say?" Mara repeated.

"I . . . I said that Cyan was alive," Leia said softly.Â Now that the fissure in her self-delusions was opened, it could never be closed again.Â The truth poured out in great, unstoppable waves.Â "He's been alive all this time.Â You thought I had killed him while at the same time you were in disbelief that I could do such a thing.Â Well, you were right, I couldn't do such a thing.Â I read the bio report on him and it said that until he shed his first layer of skin some below military grade acids would be able to wound him.Â It also said that putting him in stasis, _such as incasing him in carbonite, would suspend the mental bound between him and Luke.Â It was suggested that it could be broken fully if one or both of them stopped trying to maintain the bound.Â That's why I lied.Â If I could get Luke to think Cyan was dead, and afterwards _ accept that Cyan was dead, I thought he would subconsciously let go of the mental bound and he would be free of Cyan's influence.Â When that happened, I planned on telling him and then we would release Cyan back on K'ti'ma."Â Leia stopped, finally unable to continue.Â Her words had been slow and halting, stained with her grief.Â Corran was shaking his head in disbelief, Mara was appalled, and Han . . . Han wasn't even looking at her, his eyes were closed and his face was the face of someone experiencing some terrible pain.Â "I didn't think it would end like this."__

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"Why didn't you release Cyan when Luke almost died the first time?Â Why didn't you release Cyan when it became apparent that he was losing his mind?Â Why didn't you release Cyan when we thought Luke was dead the first time?Â When he showed up on Tatooine leading a revolt?Â When he killed all those people?Â When we got him back and he didn't get any better?Â What didn't you do something?!" Mara demanded, her voice rising not with anger, but with terrible anguish.

Leia blinked her eyes and tried to rub away the tears gathering there.Â "I thought he would get better!Â Han said he was getting better!"Â At this Han started to shake his head, withdrawing his hand from Mara's arm and walking towards the edge of the ledge.Â "I thought if there was a chance this could work, I'd take it.Â Iâ€"I didn't think he would do this!Â I had no warning!"

"Yes you did!" the words exploded from Han's mouth as his feelings of betrayal and denial reached the brink and passed over it.Â "You had all the warning in the universe but you didn't realize it!Â The dreams!Â Every night they have been shouting at you to stop this and let Cyan go!Â And you ignored them because you thought you were right!Â Damn it, Leia, this isâ€"wasâ€"Luke!Â He could bloody well take care of himself, it's not up to you to chose who he did and didn't trust.Â But you went ahead and did it anyway and . . . and now . . . he's . . ."Â The tears came to him now, and Mara rushed over and caught him just as his knees gave out.Â Corran came over

and they helped him to sit.

Mara gently extracted herself from Han's embrace and walked over to Leia, her fury returning with a vengeance. "Where is he? Where is Cyan? We have to release him to do his job, carry on Luke's memories and experiences so he will never truly die. Take me to him now and release him because he's all we've got left!"

"He's here. I . . . I was going to release him if my talk with Luke didn't work. I knew—sort of, in the back of my head—that this wasn't working anymore, but I had hoped . . ." her voice trailed off and Leia looked at the raging river. Compressing her lips, Leia pushed away from the wall and resolutely started up the path.

Leia took them to a nondescript warehouse just down the street from where they were staying. The massive slab of carbonite was kept in a large crate near the back, with no markings on it besides a ****Delicate warning on the side.** It was perfectly hidden, though there wasn't much need to, Mara thought, since none of us had even the slightest inkling Cyan was alive. Maybe if Karrde had managed to interrogate those mercenaries better—but that was neither here nor there. What mattered now was Cyan would be freed and at least there would always be something of Luke in the universe. Leia hadn't spoken a word since they left the mountains. Though, none of them felt particularly inclined to talk to her anyway. ******

The worker droids moved the crate to the middle of the floor and then left at Mara's terse command. Han and Corran opened the crate and stood back as the sides fell away to reveal their sorrowful contents. They could see Cyan's profile, stretched out in his futile struggle to get free of the coldness of the carbonite. His back was arched impossibly, his wings curled in pain, his tail was coiled in mid whip. His mouth was opened in a silent scream and his eyes were wide and staring. It looked to those observing him that the way the carbonite had dribbled made it appear as if in the end he had been crying.

Leia walked forward with slow, measured tread; she reached the side of the block of carbonite and punched in the code that would release the dragon from his confinement. She stepped away and watched, the feeling of wretchedness was almost overwhelming. "Let him come and devour me," Leia pleaded to some unknown source as the carbonite glowed red and Cyan began to slip free of his prison. "Let him be so furious at what I have done that he rips out my throat and ends this life. I deserve no better and I would ask for no more."

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Finally Cyan came out, slumping to the ground as if there were not a bone left in his body. He let out a tortured moan and Mara rushed forward, stroking his head as he struggled to rise.

"Luke? Luke! Help me! I can't see!" Cyan cried, struggling to rise against Mara's firm pressure downward. "Luke!"

"It's all right, Cyan, it's Mara. You have hibernation sickness, you'll be able to see soon enough. Shhh, lie down and rest, you've

been in there a long time," Mara said soothingly.

Cyan crooned weakly and slumped back down. "He turned his sightless eyes to Mara and asked softly, "Where is Luke?" He's so cold, so, so cold. "I have to go to him."

"Cyan . . ." Mara began, having trouble getting the words past the lump in her throat. " . . .Cyan, he's gone to the Beyond. He killed himself by jumping off a cliff into a river. I'm sorry"

"No!" Cyan cried. He pushed Mara away and lurched to his feet. He looked around, stumbling, falling, and climbing back to his feet again as he searched for his padmiri. "Luke! Luke, where are you? I know you're not dead, but tell me where you are!" He sat up on his haunches, swaying dangerously, but Mara could not convince him to lay back down. Suddenly his eyes widened, even though he still could not see anything with them, and he gave a tiny curious, if worried, croon.

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Leia watched the whole scene with a horrible feeling in the pit of her stomach. "He's wandering around a tundra, with nothing but crystal spikes to find shelter against. He's cold, cold beyond imagination and he can't even tell you're calling him." Everyone turned to look at her, most with astonishment, but Han with grim acceptance. He knew, he knew it was just another part of the warnings.

"You!" Cyan snarled. He couldn't see her, but he could hear her, smell her, and soon would taste her. "You are the one who put me in there and tore us apart! You are the one who betrayed us!" With that last exclamation he bolted in her direction, innately knowing where his prey was. He reached her and swung out his hand with its deadly talons. Leia reflexively jumped back, then tripped over the hem of her dress and stumbled to the ground. There she lay, and though she uselessly threw up an arm to protect her face, she made no move to escape. Cyan reared up and opened his mouth as wide as he could, displaying his jagged teeth and curling tongue as he prepared to crush Leia between his powerful jaws.

"Cyan, stop!"

Cyan skidded to a halt, turning his head to a place just in front of Leia where the small cry had originated. There stood Olive, his head craned back to regard his tall brethren. Though he trembled, he refused to give any ground when Cyan snarled and took a menacing step towards him. "You have to stop," Olive said firmly, though he was breathing hard. He had followed them into the mountains but his shorter legs hadn't allowed him to keep up. He'd known what Luke needed and somehow had found his way here. He knew what Cyan needed as well, just as any other dragon would. "She did a terrible thing, but remember the Set Moment! She is there, so she has a purpose. Besides," he added meekly, "she let you go, so maybe there's still some hope."

Cyan turned to the small dragon and then uttered a frustrated, grieving moan and sank back down to the floor. Mara rushed to him while Corran swiftly picked up Olive and hugged him, knowing how much

courage it must have taken him to do what he had done. Â Corran knew that he would not have been brave enough to jump in Cyan's way at that point.

"What do we do now?" Han asked, standing a little ways away from Leia as if he had meant to go to her, then changed his mind.

"You go find him," Leia said softly.Â She rose unsteadily to her feet and pulled out her comlink as she stiffly walked away, ignoring Han's imploring look. Â "There's only one place on this planet that looks like that . . . I'll get some transports for you."

â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"â€"

The Falstryx Tundra was vast, taking up almost half of Konstan Prime's southern continent.Â So vast, in fact, that to find a lone man seemed an impossible task to most, unless one took into consideration several facts.Â The Falstryxan Mountains cleaved the Falstryx Tundra in two, and while enormously long, there were only relatively small areas in which one could travel on foot. Â The Aslryx River into which Luke had jumped ran through a particularly narrow corridor, and then ran swiftly to the perpetual winter of the southern pole. Given on top of that a man who was wet, severely wounded, and mentally unstable would not be able to travel all that well in a frozen environment, it limited the search radius to about 50 klicks. Â Which, while difficult, did not deter the searchers one little bit.

It was in the midst of this area that the shivering Jedi Master and the blind bronze dragon trudged along.Â Mara huddled in the fleecy jacket the land speeder driver had lent her and pressed her body against Cyan's warm neck.Â The snow was almost chest deep to the dragon, but he stumbled forward, refusing any respite.

"You should have rested first," Mara said through lips stiff with cold. Â "At least wait until you're gotten some of your sight back."

Cyan shook his head, though he could barely keep walking for the coldâ€"though he would never admit it.Â He wondered idly if his tack was going to become frozen to his back like Han had suggested before he and Corran set out in the opposite direction where the land speeder's sensors had picked up life readings. Cyan quickly thrust those thoughts out of his mind. He didn't care, he had to find Luke, he just had too. Â The cold was making his mind wander and he couldn't afford that right now, they had to find Luke.Â Besides, there was no way Mara could have stayed on without being strapped in with all the snow banks and crystal shards they wound up leaping over. Â It might have been quicker to fly, but without his sight, and with the buffering, twisting winds, Cyan did not trust himself enough to chance it.

"Luke might be dead by the time I get my sight back," Cyan said finally, jumpingâ€"at Mara's signalâ€"over a jagged spike in their path. Â "He can't afford to wait."

Mara stayed silent for a moment, and then asked the question that had been pressing on both their thoughts since they had first set out, "What will you do if he's already dead?"

"He's not.Â He will make it.Â He is strong and he has too much left to do.Â Besides, I would know and the Force would not be leading me out here for nothing," Cyan said, his voiceâ€"so like Luke! Mara thought not for the first timeâ€"was full of conviction.Â Looking behind them at their fast filling tracks leading unerringly in a straight line, Mara had to agree that they seemed to be going in the right direction.

Turning ahead again, Mara saw it.Â Two crystal spikes raising up out of the ground, crossing to form a small shelter.Â Inside the small crevasse they could see a huddled form almost buried in the snow.

Wake up.

_ No, I don't want to wake up , Luke told the gentle hands, which supported him so he could get more air into his frozen lungs.Â _ I'm tired.Â Let me sleep.____

—

I can't let you sleep, it's not your time yet.Â Wake up, wake up and stay with us.Â There is so much left for you to do and . . . and we all love you too much for you to sleep now.

Luke struggled feebly, his strength quickly waning.Â It had taken almost everything he had left to pull his sodden body from the cold river and drag it across the snow-blanketed land.Â And now it seemed he did not have the strength left to die.Â _I don't care anymore.Â I'm tired and I want to sleep.____

—

_ I know, said the insistent voice, the strangely familiar voice, _ I'm tired too.Â But I cannot do this without you.Â Please, Luke, I love you and you have to wake up!____

—

Luke stopped struggling and just lay still.Â The voice had struck a cord in him and his curiosity tugged enough at his consciousness to make him want to see who it was.Â His mind was tired, slow, but he knew the voice was male.Â It wasn't Han, or Corran or anyone else he knew to be around.Â It is . . . it is me?

It was Cyan.

"Thank the Force!" Mara cried as she saw Luke slowly blink as he returned to consciousness.Â "He's finally coming around, Cyan!"

"I know, he will stay," Cyan said, his voice wary with exhaustion and with relief that Luke had listened.

Luke made no sound.Â He just looked up at Mara from where his head rested on her lap.Â He reached up slowly as Mara busied herself by pulling blankets around him.Â He touched her face gingerly, as if afraid she would disappear, bringing Mara's attention away from her task.Â She smiled down at him and grasped his hand.Â She shifted her gaze and Luke followed it, an inarticulate cry escaping his lips

when he realized what she was looking at.

Cyan curved his wings around them to block out the wind, and leaned down and gently licked Luke on the cheek.Â Luke moaned and with a sudden burst of energy that neither Mara nor Cyan would have credited him with at that point, wrapped his arms around Cyan's neck and buried his face in the bronze scales, both promising never to let go again.

> <p class="MsoNormal"> Chapter V<p>

Cyan passed back and forth in front of the bacta tank where Luke serenely floated in the blue curative juices.Â His sight was gradually returning to normal and he could just make out the fuzzy edges of the tank and Luke's bluish shape inside. Â They had taken him back to Coruscant since Konstan Prime's medical facilities were less than stellar.Â Luke had been in the tank for hours, since they first carried him onto the Mon Calamari Cruiser _Sea Snake, and he remained in there even when they transported him down to the medical facilities on Coruscant.Â For the first time in a long time, all that anyone could sense from his mind was contentment._

—

Mara had been escorted back to her and Luke's quarters while Leia, without a word to any of them, left to continue in her negotiations to have her freed. Corran and Olive had remained on Konstan Prime until Mirax got the _ Pulsar Skate safely off world as both husband and wife decided it would be a good time to end Corran's leave of absence. Â Han did nothing except silently brood on the bed, which left Cyan with no one to distract him from his worries. Â Even if Luke was healing nicely from his newest set of wounds, this wasn't the end of things by a long shot._

—

So he paced back and forth, back and forth, back Â . . . and forth until Han finally couldn't stand it anymore. Â "Could you stop?Â You're incessant pacing is driving me insane.Â Why don't you go try and find something constructive to do like kill some helpless animal?" Han demanded.

Cyan glared at him (even though he couldn't make out a single feature on his face and the only reason he knew it was Han was from his patented black vest and the blood stripesâ€"at least he hoped they were blood stripesâ€"going down his legs).Â He would have snarled an angry reply but he could sense the turmoil underneath the surface of Han's irritated exterior.

"Fine," Cyan said at last, realizing that it probably _ wouldn't be a bad idea for him to get out of the room, "I'll go find something else to do."_

—

Once he got out into the hallway, Cyan stopped dead in his tracks and sat down, glancing about him dejectedly.Â He really had no idea where to go from here.Â He wasn't hungry, and there was no one else near by and he could barely see a thing. Â He knew instantly that he

wouldn't be able to bring himself to leave the hospital to find people even though the doctors had assured him that it would still be hours before Luke would be taken out of the bacta tank.

Sighing, he strolled down the hall, absently trying to read patients charts as he wandered by rooms. He went on like this for some time until he found one with a familiar name on it. "Karrde!" he exclaimed softly for the benefit of those resting in near by rooms. "What happened to him?" Cyan cast about in the experiences he was slowly assimilating from Luke while he had been in the carbonite and then gasped. "Oh! He's still in the coma! Hmm, I wonder how he's doing? Well, I don't think anyone will mind if I have a peek. It's not like I'm going to wake him up."

Peering into the room, he saw Karrde stretched out on a bed, with small square devices placed at strategic spots on his temple. Creeping in silently, Cyan saw that there was no one there. That surprised him a bit, he would have expected Shada D'ukal to be there, but there was no one else in sight. Shrugging, Cyan padded over and sat, crooking his head at the smuggler turned respectable citizen.

Turning his thoughts to his padmiri , Cyan could feel the chemical imbalance evening itself out and knew the revulsion Luke had felt before would be multiplied ten times when he awakened. The guilt trip would be almost impossible for Cyan to bare for him. Luke would want to make amends, Cyan knew, so he settled himself down and decided to give his friend a head start.

Shada D'ukal sipped the bitter cafe as she walked briskly down the hospital halls. To all those who watched her go past, they saw an officer of high rank striding confidently to her destination, her expression calm, her manner reserved. Of course, the whole appearance of indifference was belayed by the fact that she showed up every night at the exact same time and didn't leave until the next day, looking as though she had stayed awake the entire time.

Quite frankly Shada no longer cared. She was tired of playing the part of the calm, cool and collected Chief of the Joint New Republic/Imperial Intelligence Force. That was your job, Karrde , Shada chided him silently as she turned down the last hallway that would take her to his room, and you were always a hell of a lot better at it than I.

She swept into his room without even having to think about which direction to take, so accustomed was she to traveling down this path. As a result, she was quite stunned to see a dull bronze dragon sitting calmly beside his bed with his hand resting lightly on Karrde's forehead.

Shada jumped and cried out in surprise, spilling half her coffee and just managing to save the cup. Despite her reaction to his presence, Cyan had not moved an inch. Switching her drink to her other hand while she tried to shake the uncomfortably hot liquid off the first, Shada moved closer to see what Cyan was doing. His eyes were closed and he seemed to be concentrating very hard. After

watching him do absolutely nothing for a time, Shada reached for the button that would call down the nurse, not sure if there was something wrong with the dragon or if he was doing something to Karrde. Just as her thumb touched the switch Cyan opened his eyes and gasped as if he had just made some great realization. At the exact same time, Karrde opened his eyes and uttered the same gasp.

Shada dropped the cup.

Cyan shook his head to clear away the fog that had taken up residence in it. Coming back to reality slowly, he regarded Karrde proudly as he partially sat up and looked around the room with bleary eyes.

"Where am I?" Karrde asked, frowning at Shada who could do nothing at the moment except stare open mouthed at him in her astonishment.

Seeing that Shada wasn't going to say anything (she had always seemed like the reserved type but was now really the time?) and wanting to be helpful, Cyan spoke for her. "You're in a hospital. You've been in a coma for almost a year and I just woke you up. You're welcome, by the way."

Karrde jumped at the sound of Cyan's voice and thought for a second that it must be Luke. Of course, this made the sight of the dragon all the more startling. Karrde quickly found himself in the same state as his partner.

A crease appeared between Cyan's eyes at this. He knew Karrde was quite reserved but this was really too much. Perhaps it's a symptom of coming out of a coma, Cyan mused, and maybe it spread to Shada. Except Shada couldn't talk first. Perhaps it was an intelligence thing . . . Cyan huffed in frustration and ruffled his wings at the impoliteness of it all.

"You know, the least you could do is say thank you. I know Luke pushed you down the stairs but that was hardly his fault." Cyan stated. "He said he feels really bad, by the way."

"Youâ€"you'reâ€" " Karrde stuttered. He swallowed and tried again. "You're dead!"

"I am?" Cyan exclaimed, rather alarmed. He looked down and felt around, trying to find whatever it was that must have killed him in the past few seconds. Finding nothing, he glared at Karrde suspiciously. "Are you sure? Because no one else told me and I'm sure Han would have said something. Though he _has been kind of distracted today . . ."_

—

"Noâ€"I meanâ€"Luke saidâ€"The mercenariesâ€"You're dead!" Karrde exclaimed the last when he realized nothing else he was trying to think of was making any sense even to him except for that last fact.

Cyan's eyes widened and what passed for his brows raised. Then he nodded wisely. "Oh, you don't know. That's right. Shada, you

a long journey, like a perfect reunion. ^ He touched his hand to the glass and knew there was a bronze one mirroring it on the other side.^ The sensation was like an electric bolt that gave him strength of purpose he had been missing for time uncounted.

The hatch above him opened and he swam upwards, a kind of joy surging through him such as he felt only a few select instances before. ^ He reached the surface and the 2-lb droid removed the breathing mask. ^ Luke inhaled deeply, the air soothing and cool against his skin after the gentle warmth of the bacta.^ He climbed out slowly on wobbly legs, even though the thing he wanted to do most was jump off the ladder and run to the dragon waiting below. ^ He reached the ground and before the medical droid could wash the last lingering traces of bacta off, Luke threw his arms around Cyan, who, sensing his _padmiri's intentions, moved to respond and caught him at the last instant. ^ They stayed that way for a long time, neither willing to let go after so long a separation._

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The medical droid, seeing that precious bacta was dripping onto the floor, attempted to pull Luke back to the shower area beside the tank. ^ As soon as he came near the pair, Cyan snarled so viciously that the droid fell back.^ It hummed and beeped anxiously as more bacta was wasted. ^ Mara smiled and stepped forward, pointing out that Cyan now had bacta on him so they would both have to be washed off. ^ Cyan moved them into the spray; Luke did not even look up from where he had buried his face in the dragon's scales.

When they were finished, Cyan picked Luke up and carried him to his bed, snarling at the droid again when it tried to tell him Luke was perfectly capable of walking.^ Cyan placed his _padmiri under the covers, climbed into the bed with him, all without braking their embrace. ^ Luke held tightly, refusing to let go ever again._

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Han and Lando were walking swiftly down the hall to Luke's room. ^ Han had gone to pick up Lando from the Coruscant Spaceport so that they could both be there when Luke got out of the bacta tank. ^ They would have made it, but there was a massive speeder crash and they were held up for two hours while the authorities tried to identify Han's land speeder out of the pile plastered to the side of a building. ^ As it was, they found less than half, and were forced to leave with the knowledge that just enough had been found to assure them that their speeder wasn't lost, it was just totaled.

Han turned the last corner a full three strides ahead of Lando and ran head on into Chewbacca.^ Chewie howled and swung his arms in an outraged gesture that almost hit Lando as he came barreling around the corner after Han.

"We got in a speeder crash!^ We're lucky we're not bug squat!" Han exclaimed over Chewie's roaring. ^ Chewie growled impatiently and flapped his hand behind him in the direction Han and Lando had been running.

Lando shrugged. "If he's out of the bacta, which he should be by now, than he's probably in bed, Chewie. Where else would he be?"

Chewie wolfed and threw his arms up.

"What do you mean you don't know?" Han asked, getting worried.

Chewie shrugged and growled.

"He disappeared? How the hell did that happen?" Lando asked.

Suddenly Mara came up behind Chewie and put her arm on the distraught Wookiee's arm. "Calm down, Chewie. Look you too, I'll yell at you for being late later, we have to find Luke and Cyan."

"But that wasn't our fault!" Han and Lando said in unison. Mara glared at them so fiercely though that they didn't press the point.

"Wait," Lando said, finally catching on to the last part of what Mara had said. "Cyan's missing too?"

Mara nodded sourly. "Luke hasn't even been out of the tank for more than an hour. The doctor just left, and Chewie and me decided to leave so Luke could be alone with Cyan for a little while. We got some caf and by the time we got back, they were both missing."

"Maybe they got moved to a different room," Han suggested.

Mara shook her head. "We already asked. The staff has no idea where they are."

Chewie roared loudly and made a grand gesture.

"No kidding, Chewie. C'mon, let's go find them," Han said.

Luke wasn't far. He sat on top of the medical centre with Cyan sitting protectively behind him. He wanted to meditate, but he knew the kind of pain that would bring about. So he sat in silence and tried to find some solace.

He wasn't having much luck.

He could feel a stirring around him. It was gentle at first, like a light summer's breeze teasing the hairs at the nape of his neck, but then he realized that it wasn't physical. The Force was moving, gathering around him, whispering something he could almost hear, but not quite. It nagged at him, begging to be heard. The Force would not ask him to listen if it wasn't important. He knew that.

Cyan crooned and held onto Luke's hand while his padmiri opened his mind to the Force for the first time in a long while. It came flooding in, soothing as always, but laced with a silver pain that coursed throughout his body. He ignored the pain, and listened to what the Force was saying.

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At first he was assaulted with a vision like the one he had been given on Tierfon, the vision that had lead him to Nirauan to find Mara and ultimately to find love as well.Â He saw the twisting lines of each possible future curving around each other, sometimes hitting one another, forever changed by the encounter. Then he saw something strikingly out of place.Â Always before each line of destiny would collide and forever be left changed by the encounter, but as the vision progressed further into the future, more lines would converge . . . and bounce off each other with no effect. Â Each line irrevocably led to one single point.

It is a set moment in time . . .

That voice!Â Realization coursed though Luke.Â The voice cut through the vision like a pure, musical note.Â His first impression was that it was the Mother Dragon, but then he remembered another voice, ageless, with unlimited power.Â Not quite an intelligence, not quite a single entity, but with a purpose and sentience well beyond his limited understanding. Â A voice that felt so indefinably familiar it felt as if it had spoken to him for all his life.

The only thing in question is how you will get there . . .

The words seemed to be an echo in the Force of what was said before. Â Or was it simply the Force repeating itself? Â The thought was so strange that Luke tried to pause a moment to figure out why he had thought it up, but the lines of destiny were drawing him closer and he paused to look.

He saw again a flash of the vision from Tierfon, his students leaving the Academy on Yavin IV, but it was clearer.Â They were on a ship of delicate design, with layers fanning out from the nose like jagged claws, as if some sharp flower were opening to the dawn.

Luke frowned, wondering what this portended, for there seemed to be much he wasn't seeing, besides the reason his students were leaving. Â Again he was not given time to inspect the scene for he saw something else much further down the line that drew his attention.

The men shoved him down onto the red slabs of rock.Â He heard Mara scream and struggled to rise but the men holding him were strong and he hadn't the physical strength to combat them. Â The fever that burned his skin wreaked havoc with his mind. Â He tried to use the Force but it was like sand through his fingers. Â He looked up and saw Mara stumble to the ground when the shirt Regg had a hold of her by ripped.Â Mara tried to crawl away but Regg shoved her back down to the rocks again . . .

The vision was forcibly torn away from him, though he clawed at it desperately, pleading to see its end but was ultimately left even more confused. Â He looked foreward toward the Set Moment, and knew what it would be, the final scene that the Dream had shown him. Â An irrevocable event that seemed to hang over his head like a scaffold. Â However something happened, something else drew him toward onward. Something that would happen before the Set Moment. Â Something that would shape his destiny just as much as when his hand was cut off at Bespin, perhaps more so.

It was then that Luke returned to reality with a scream of absolute pain.

"C'mon you guys, the roof's the only place left to look," Han said, jogging out of the turbolift before the doors were fully opened. Â The others followed him to the roof door, which was generally only used if some of the medical staff wanted to consume some illicit substances or some patients wanted to join them.Â

They had just entered into the starlit night when they heard Luke's cry. Â It was echoed immediately after by Cyan, though Han could barely hear it above the pounding of his heart.Â He darted around an exhaust port and saw Cyan supporting Luke as the Jedi hunched over in pain.Â Not again, Han thought desperately, he couldn't be losing it again. He wouldn't, couldn't let that happen ever again.Â The four friends raced over and knelt around Luke's hunched body while Cyan made soothing noises, drawing as much of the pain away as he was able to take on.

"What happened, Luke?" Mara asked concernedly. Â "Did you try and use the Force?" Â

Luke shook his head from side to side and then straightened partially and held out his hands with the palms turned upward. Â "That's not it," he whispered.Â "It's this."Â Mara gasped in astonishment while Han murmured and oath.

In the middle of each hand was a puncture wound that went all the way through, and there wasn't a single weapon in sight that could have done it.

> <p class="MsoBodyTextIndent2"> Chapter VI<p>

Luke sat with his head resting on Mara's shoulder as the 2-1b droid replaced his right cybernetic hand.

"How did this happen?" Mara asked again, gently massaging his left hand where the cauterizer had seared the wound shut, leaving an ugly scar. Â There was also a new set of scars on both sides of his ankles where the unseen object had punctured them as well. Â As soon as they had partially carried Luke down from the roof, the droid tried to usher them into the bacta room so Luke could be dunked again. Â But the moment the droid suggested treatment Luke stopped dead in his tracks and refused to go any further. Â It was a warning, Luke said, and he would not hide from it. Â Too many warnings had gone unheeded as of late.

"I wanted to be alone with Cyan," Luke explained, wincing when Mara pressed just a little too hard against the angry red wound. Â "There were too many machines here, too many people coming and going. Â So we went to the roof.Â I . . . I didn't intend to use the Force, just to meditate. Â But I could feel it stirring, like it wanted me to listen to something. Â So I did.Â It didn't really hurt," The medical droid finished with his hand and Luke used it to rub his head, as if to coax the memories into becoming clearer. Â "At least, not after the first part, I think. Â Once things started I wasn't aware of my body at all. Â I saw a vision like Tierfon, but something wasn't right. Â

"Yoda said the future was always in motion, but I don't think that's true right now.Â What I saw in the Dream, with all the Jedi on the hill, and the shattering city; that will happen. Â I don't know how it will end, but that's how it will start. Â And as we get closer, there are less possibilities for us to chose from, less options."

"Is that why you guys are having all these visions?" Lando asked. Â "I mean, admittedly I'm not the expert here, but you guys are having them practically every day now."

Luke nodded slowly, his eyes starring off into the distance as if he could see the layout of the future before him.Â "That sounds about right.Â It's like every different possible path to the future is a filter that we have to look through in order to see ahead, and as our choices are cut down and the filters are taken away, the view becomes much clear. Â But as to what happened to me, I saw . . . I saw many things. Â But the last thing that I saw was my own crucifixion."

"Crucifixion?" Han exclaimed.Â "But that ain't right at all.Â Who the hell crucifies anyone anymore?Â Besides, if you're at this Set Moment, or whatever, than how could you be crucified too?"

"Maybe it doesn't kill me, maybe something else. Â I don't know, I barely understood anything myself. Â But the vision itself . . . it was so clear, so perfectâ€"however briefâ€"that, well I guess I manifested it in physical form," Luke shrugged helplessly at his inability to express it better.

Lando shook his head.Â "That makes even less sense.Â Why would the Force punish you if you're going to have to do this big event thingy? Â Hurting you even more is just going to keep you from doing all the things you have too."

"It wasn't a punishment," Luke said sternly. Â "It was a warning of things to come. Â We haven't been listening for so long, I guess the Force decided that we needed something louder."

"Whatever.Â I don't care about that right now.Â Like the dream told you, worry about the present, 'cause there's nothing you can do about the future," Mara said matter of factually.Â Luke smiled and shifted to get closer to her.Â He let his hand rest on her stomach and closed his eyes. Â Then they opened again and he sat up, staring at Mara in astonishment.

"You're pregnant!"

"At least I didn't have to tell you this time," Mara said with a lopsided grin at the stunned expression on his face.

Luke ignored her comment and stretched out with the Force, ignoring the pain for the sake of feeling the new life stirring within his wife. Â No, not one life . . . Suddenly Cyan chortled in amusement and a form of triumph.Â "Twins even!"

"Twins?"Â Now it was Mara's turn to be stunned.Â "Are you sure?" Â Mara stretched out and sure enough, upon a closer inspection she had not bothered to do for all the distractions, she found two little

souls floating in oblivion.Â Her cheeks turned a bright red and she grinned sheepishly at Luke. Â "Oops, didn't notice that part."

Luke grinned back at her as he shifted his body further down the bed so he could rest his cheek against her abdomen. Â "Don't feel bad, nice to know I can still see into my wife a little better than her sometimes."

"Not for me!" Mara exclaimed, and then let out a small woof when Cyan took it into his head to join them and hopped enthusiastically onto the bed, and then happily draped his languid body across their legs.

"So . . ." Lando said after a long pause and then decided to ask the question no one else wanted to, "what are we going to do with Leia?" Â He said it casually enough, but the question sucked all the good humor out of the room.

Cyan lifted his head and glared at Lando with eyes as hard as obsidian. Â "Something horrible.Â I don't care what her intentions were, what she did was inexcusable!"

"What do you mean by something horrible, Cyan?" Han demanded angrily. Â "Throw her in prison?Â Beat her senseless?"

"I'd rather the latter to the former but the former will probably have to do," Cyan growled.

Mara pursed her lips, "What do you think, Luke? You were the one hurt the most by all this."

"I don't know," Luke said softly.Â "Prison won't do anything constructive, and besides, if she really wanted to she could talk her way out, I bet.Â But . . . there isn't much we can do.Â I can try and throw her off the council, which shouldn't be too hard. Â Just tell Borsk Fey'lya what she did, and the rest will take care of itself.Â That . . . that would be vengeful, though, wouldn't it." Luke sighed gustily, and from the expression of mild consternation on Cyan face, it was evident that the two weren't in agreement over this matter.Â "I'm tired of being angry and vengeful.Â I'm tired of hating my sister.Â I'm just plain tired of hating.Â I just don't know."

Luke awoke with a gasp of pain.Â He sat up in bed and willed the throbbing to disperse, but it never did, not completely.Â He gave a shuddering sigh and rubbed his arms, suddenly feeling cold in the temperate medical centre. Â He looked around the room, hoping to find someone around to talk to, but no one was there.Â The 21-b droid said no visitors after 18:00 hours (they had to forcibly shove Mara out but the medical droid didn't even try and dissuade the stubborn dragon who had absolutely no intention of leaving the bed). Â Luke was loath to wake Cyan up for despite the front the dragon was putting up, he was still weak from the carbonite and his sight was far from perfect.Â Before Luke could lie back down, Cyan woke of his own accord and crooned. Â Wriggling up from the base of the bed, Cyan curled his neck around Luke's head and hugged his padmiri close.Â Luke sighed and gave a little shiver.

"Why do this too me?" Luke asked brokenly. Â "Why torment me with whispers and fleeting glances of what it to come.Â Why put me

through all this and then ask me for more when it is no longer possible for me to give?" Â He sat up and slammed his fist against his leg in frustration. Â "I can't even meditate without extreme pain. Â And now I am expected to shatter a city!"

Cyan shrugged his shoulders, shifting his wings on his back. Â "That is a long time from now.Â We'll find some way to heal you.Â Who knows what will happen between now and then?"

"I know who knows," Luke said softly.Â "The Mother Dragon.Â I think she knows more about what's going on than the Force does."

"The Mother Dragon is wise . . . " Cyan said, not liking the idea that was forming in Luke's head.

Luke compressed his lips, then threw the light blanket to the side. Â "She guided me before, she's proven how powerful she is. Â If she wants me to go forward, she better damn well give me something to go forward with."

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Leia wandered along the myriad skywalks of the great city world. Â She gazed through the glass cover at the stars that peppered the sky, dimly sparkling as they warred with the lights of the skyscrapers and transports for dominance.Â She had no idea where she was going, she just knew she couldn't stay at home to sit by herself and wallow in self-pity.Â She wanted desperately to run to the hospital, fall at Luke's feet and beg his forgiveness.Â But the a part of her, the same part that had helped her become the youngest senator of the Old Republic, helped her lead the Alliance to victory, and go on to establish the New Republic, kept her from going.Â She remembered a long time ago, hearing Luke comment that if anything were to bring about Leia's downfall, it would be what made her successful; her determination and pride.Â How true, it would seem.

And the part of her that caused her to turn all the power she'd gain to good, her empathy for someone in pain, or crushed by injustice, and fed that determination to make the perpetrators pay for their crimes, know that even if she went, she would get no forgiveness.

So she wandered the skywalks and promenades with no real direction, no purpose. Â She eventually made her way to a landing platform and gave up her remorseful march.Â Finding a cafÃ© with an open seating area, she sat gazing at the stars and pondered her twist fate.

In one of the brief moments when she let her eyes fall from their contemplation of the heavens to gaze at the multitude flowing past on their way off world, she saw something that caught her attention. Â There wasn't anything overtly odd about the figure, in fact he was so far away that the only thing she could make out was his sandy brown hair. Â His clothes were fairly nondescript as well, and she wouldn't have even noticed him except for the fact that he was riding a dragon.

Luke hadn't the slightest clue he'd been spotted. Â In fact, the moment anyone near enough to see his features realized who he was, Cyan would carefully alter their mind to see someone else. Â

Entering a familiar hanger, Cyan trotted easily over to the Millennium Falcon sitting serenely in the centre.Â Punching in the access code that Han only gave to his most trusted friends, they boarded.Â Cyan plunked himself down in the hallway adjacent to the cockpit while Luke sat down in the pilot's seat and started the checklist.Â Once he had the engines humming he entered his emergency clearance code. Then with a final Jedi Mind Trick on the Vinchi in the control tower from Cyan, they lifted off.

The flight there went without incident (surprising, considering they were in the Falcon).Â Luke brought them out of hyperspace a little early at the system's edge to give him time to think.Â He could see K'ti'ma V twinkling an incandescent blue in the distance.Â His eyes turned unwillingly to the red star spinning malevolently on the other side to the system from him.Â It seemed like a great and horrible eye, staring into his soul, growing as it devoured the darkness around it.Â Shuddering, he quickly turned away and forced the disturbing vision from his mind as he brought the Falcon to its destination.

The atmosphere seemed more turbulent than he remembered, the great winds and currents bucked the Falcon around as if she were nothing but a lone feather lost in a maelstrom.Â Once they reached a relatively low altitude, the winds subsided to a manageable level and they continued on easily.

Of course, it was another story all together once they left the ship.Â The moment Luke stepped out onto the ramp he was almost blown right off his feet.Â Cyan caught him and dutifully supported his weakened padmiri into the forest.Â As they walked forward both were not only assaulted with the wind, but with the profound impression of the surreal landscape.Â The red giant cast its brilliance upon the land, staining everything with its bloody touch.Â The trees swayed and groaned as if they were lamenting what was to be.Â Padmiri and dragon huddled together against the biting winds of the usually temperate world.

They wondered through the forest until they came to the aeries, to the place from whence Cyan was hatched.Â The wind whistled through the branches and the trees moaned, the noises joining together to create a terrible song.Â Luke felt his body trembling, from cold, weakness, or fear he did not know.Â He sank to the ground, gazing at the suddenly alien surrounds, knowing this was more disturbing to Cyan than it was to him.Â The dragon crouched on the ground beside Luke and huddled close, and it was then that both of them realized that none of the abundant life that usually covered the world was apparent.Â The aeries were empty, the branches barren.Â None of the heavyset creatures bumbled through the unaccustomed light, none of the strange rat-like creatures that had plagued his sister sulked about.Â No dragon sang to her comrades.Â All was silent except for the keening trees, as if in reverence for something.

"But what?" Cyan whispered, causing them both to jump at the unexpected noise.Â "What does all this mean?"

Suddenly a sound like distant thunder rocked the ground and the keening wind abruptly stopped.Â Luke and Cyan traded glances, finding the silence somehow even more threatening.Â Then came the thunder once more, causing the tall grass that carpeted the forest to sway, brushing together and whispering in urgent trepidation.Â The

ground shook with thunder again, and again, and soon the branches were swaying, joining the grass in the chatter. ^ Cyan turned his darting eyes to the trees in front of them and did a double take.^ The great trunks of the trees were all swaying now, but the trees in front of them almost seemed to be shifting to the sides.

"They are," Luke whispered in awe, responding to the unspoken experiences of his dragon.^ He pointed needlessly at the roots, as, one by one, they uprooted themselves and shifted to the sides, forming a corridor into the deepest part of the forest. ^ Once several layers had been revealed, the trees stepped back to unveil a sight so beautiful, so terrifying that Luke's heart paused a beat.

There stood the Mother Dragon in all her splendor. ^ Not as the youth that she had appeared to Leia as, no, for she had continued to grow physically as her knowledge of the Force grew with her. ^ Her body was sinewy and the taught crystal scales swelled and dipped over the gentle curve of muscle and bone. ^ Her skin was like translucent diamond, and the distorted view of tissue could be seen underneath. Even her organs seemed crystalline in nature, with only pale colors showing up.^ The outline of dozens of unborn eggs could be seen developing in her womb, tinted by the color the hatchling would take at birth. ^ The long serpentine tail glided behind her, winding through the trees.^ Her feet sank into the moist ground; the obsidian talons were easily twice Cyan's length. ^ She walked on all fours, for her bulk had long since become too great to carry on just two legs.^ She stretched out her great wings languidly, the blood vessels silhouetted pink against the seemingly delicate membrane. ^ Her crest was massive and carried erect in alertness. ^ Her nose was long and tapered to a fine point; her head was framed by the two curving ebony horns and swept well beyond her face. ^ She arched her neck and regarded the two with her sable eyes and a small smile appeared on her lips.

Luke and Cyan gazed up at her, too overawed to even tremble. ^ She looked at them for a moment longer and then laughed. ^ Her laughter had the most wonderful rippling quality to it that washed over the frightened pair like warm bacta. ^ She settled back on her haunches and regarded them in a companionable manner, causing the fear and trepidation to bleed from the two almost instantly. ^ She lowered her head to better view her child and his padmiri and waited a moment before asking in her beautiful, musical voice, "Tell me why you have come, Son of Suns, when there is so much yet to be done before you reach your destiny?"

Luke swallowed noisily and got unsteadily to his feet. ^ "What can I do, in the state I am in? ^ I can't use the Force, the doctors can't fix it, and not even Cilghal can heal the damage.^ I need answers and you are the only one I can think of who can give them to me."

The Mother Dragon's expression changed to sorrow and worry. ^ "You do not understand yet, this is not good. ^ But then, when have you had the time, and how can you see without your eyes?"^ She sat unmoving for a time, musing.^ Suddenly she looked beyond the circle of trees, and then at Cyan and nodded in an understanding none of the others present shared.^ "I see, this is how it will be done.^ A trial of blood to cleanse a soul of guilt, and another of anger."

Luke traded glances with Cyan, neither knowing what she meant, but neither caring since she had agreed to heal him. He turned back but was suddenly stabbed with a silver dagger of pain in the back of his head. He gasped and clutched at his skull, staggering from the sudden assault. He forced his eyes open and gazed up at the Mother Dragon in hurt confusion. She gave him a knowing, not unsympathetic smile and just shrugged. After that Luke could not keep his eyes open any longer and his legs failed him. Cyan was there, catching him and hold him close, taking on as much of the pain as he could. There was far too much though for just one dragon, it imbued his whole being until all Luke knew was the pain. It had become a living entity, hissing and curling around him, constricting his throat until he was breathing in short, strangled gasps punctuated by screams.

"Stop!" Cyan shouted, holding Luke's struggling body against his chest. "Stop it! You're killing him!"

"No, I am setting him free," the Mother Dragon said softly. Cyan narrowed his eyes, trying to find what part of the prophecy portended to this. "Not all things are foretold, my child," the Mother Dragon added with a hint of remorse in her tone.

Cyan's suspicions increased so he lowered Luke's curled body to the ground. Try as he might, he could find no change in Luke's condition despite the Mother Dragon's wholehearted assault on him. "Than they should not have to be at all!"

In a lightning move, Cyan launched himself off the ground and onto the Mother Dragon's neck, slashing and biting viciously. The Mother Dragon reared her head up in surprise, almost knocking Cyan from his tight hold but the little dragon refused to relinquish his grip. Arching his neck back, Cyan let loose a spray of acid that hit the Mother Dragon's crest and dribbled down just behind her horn. A great rumble of pain escape the Mother Dragon and Cyan felt Luke's pain diminish. He prepared to let loose another spray but the Mother Dragon's head suddenly shot upwards and then abruptly arched back down, soundly bucking Cyan into the air. He squealed in alarm and tried to flap to safety but the branches snagged his wings. He slammed into the ground with a tremendous crash of snapping twigs and bones and for a moment was not able to move at all.

He managed to get his head up and saw the Mother Dragon towering over him, her teeth bared and black blood oozing out of the long wound across her neck. Cyan waited for her strike that would snap his spine like a twig, all the while trying to figure out how this could have happened, how they had gotten into this mess. Not all things are foretold. The words the Mother Dragon had utter only minutes ago echoed in Cyan's head, freezing him down to his soul. Perhaps Leia had been right, the dragons were all frauds and there was no prophecy. No! His mind refused to believe in that line of thought. Too much had happened exactly as She had predicted so long ago. There had to be an answer but he needed time to think, a luxury he was sure to be denied.

Sure enough, the Mother Dragon's maw opened just a bit and Cyan could see the start of the muscle contractions that would send a rain of acid down upon him. Suddenly there was a flash of amber from the side that spun towards the Mother Dragon and struck her just below the eye. She let out a small shriek and arched her neck in the

direction of this new attack as Cyan watched, mesmerized, as the flash of amber returned to the woods. Â It was then that he understood what had happened and concentrated on getting back on his feet.

Leia stood before the trees, her amber lightsaber humming in her hands. Â She walked cautiously forward, fully understanding that she would die here, but at least she could give Luke time to get out. Â If she could distract the great dragon enough, she might forget Luke and he would have the chance to get out. Â She could do that much for him, something to atone for what she had done.Â The Mother Dragon swung her nose down towards her so Leia took a swipe with her lightsaber, setting off sparks but doing nothing else.Â The Mother Dragon opened her maw wide, prepared to swallow this insolent human whole.

Leia had just resigned herself to her fate when the Mother Dragon was stopped by Cyan.Â He'd managed to push his broken body from the ground and leapt bodily at her head with complete disregard for his personal safety.Â He bit and slashed ferociously, determined to drive her off enough for Luke to escape. Â The Mother Dragon shook her head until she managed to shake Cyan down her face to a point where she could grab his tail in her teeth and throw him against the not so yielding earth as hard as she could. Â She moved towards him, forgetting about the nearby human in her desire to finish the fight quickly and get back to the business at hand.

Leia watched in astonishment from the sides, struggling with what to do. Â She would never win this fight alone, and neither would Cyan, leaving Luke to die for sure.Â Although if they worked together, they might just be able to get Luke out to safety. The problem was, as always, could she trust Cyan? Â She looked at him and saw him push himself up again, refusing to give up even though there was no hope for him. Â Leia's eyes widened when she saw his front leg bend in a place it was not meant to bend but he staunchly refused to acknowledge the wound and crouched to pounce again.Â Taking a deep breath, Leia darted forward.

She slashed at the Mother Dragon's jaw with her lightsaber to get her attention and then scurried towards the great beast's tail. Â The Mother Dragon followed her, snarling viciously. Â Leia ran back until the Mother Dragon was just about to take a step to follow her.Â Concentrating hardâ€”hoping she wouldn't accidentally run into some trees in the mean timeâ€”Leia drew on as much of the Force as she could and pulled the Mother Dragon towards her.Â Over balanced, the great leviathan crashed to the forest floor. Â The ground shook and the trees swayed in response.

Leia breathed a sigh of relief and bolted towards where Luke's unconscious body lay.Â She had almost reached him when a massive paw crushed her down.Â Leia cried out, feeling a rib snap like nothing when her body impacted with a rock.Â She struggled with all her might, but there was nothing she could do to get herself up. Â The Mother Dragon rarely made the same mistake twice, and when Leia tried to use the Force to push her paw off, she easily counteracted the human's puny attempt.Â She pressed a little harder and heard Leia scream.

Suddenly Cyan rammed into the Mother Dragon's wrist with enough force to knock it from Leia.Â He let lose another spray of acid, burning

away scale and muscle from the Mother Dragon's palm. Â With a mighty roar of his own, Cyan charged the Mother Dragon one more time, now leaping onto her back and attacking the all important joint which joined her wing to her back.Â The Mother Dragon arched her neck around and struck at him, but Cyan scurried away to another part of her, moving too fast for the much larger dragon to follow.

Leia was barely conscious, and she knew she couldn't stay awake much longer. Â She could hear Cyan and the Mother Dragon still battling it out, and was amazed at the smaller dragon's determination. Â And now that she allowed herself to look, she could see the bond between he and Luke, as clear as morning sunlight, strong as durisheet. Â She squeezed her eyes shut, realizing her terrible folly completely now, and knew it was too late.Â There was a wet thud from somewhere beside her, and she opened her eyes to see. Â Cyan lay comatose, his body slashed, scalded, and broken. Â There was no hope for any of them now and Leia closed her eyes, giving up.

> <p class="MsoBodyTextIndent2"> Chapter VII<p>

Leia woke up slowly, staring up at the green canopy of trees above her, which no longer whispered of doom, but sang the song of spring and life. Â Â Â She let her eyes wonder around and her ears to listen, catching the sounds of twerping and playful growling, matched with the sight of feathered avians fluttering between the leaves and dragons tending their eggs in the aeries nestled in the branches.Â Everything seemed right and happy again in the forests of K'ti'ma as if the battle had never happened.Â Leia blinked elaborately and tried to figure out what was going on.

Suddenly Luke's face popped into view and he grinned at her confusion. Â "How are you feeling?"

"Like I've taken a few trips through a dispenser. Â What's going on?Â Where's the Mother Dragon?"

"I think she went back to her roost, wherever that is," Luke said with an unconcerned shrug as he helped her to sit. Â He offered her a flask of water and she drank greedily. Â "You feel up to walking back to the ship?"

Leia shook her head, "I don't know.Â I don't think so.Â Iâ€™" She stopped talking rather abruptly when she was finally see the ground around them and saw that it was populated with at least two dozen dragons of various sizes and colors, all staring at them with curious black eyes.

"Are you hungry, Daughter of the Suns?Â Or still in pain?" a delicately built amethyst dragon asked, her eyes big with worry.

"N-no . . ." was all Leia could muster.

"I guess you'll half to carry her back too," Luke said ruefully. Â "We thank you for your help."

"Not at all!Â We are honored to aid the Children of the Suns and the Blue," a diamond dragon roughly twice Cyan's size said with a negligent shrug.Â "Besides, we've all had a padmiri , it feels good

to help one again."

Leia was staring around in wide-eyed shock, unable to move or speak for the life of her.Â An emerald who was twice the Falcon 's length crouched down so that Cyan, still badly beaten but alert and just as unconcerned as his padmiri , could crawl onto its back.Â It stayed on all fours and walked as carefully as it could so as not to jostle its wounded passenger.Â

"Don't get too attached," Cyan commented, "that one's mine."

The diamond dragon that had spoken before offered his leg to Leia, so Luke assisted her onto his back.Â They started walking slowly back to the ship, the other dragons walking or hopping along with them, squealing and chattering excitedly. Â After a moment Leia turned to Luke who seemed completely unharmed.

"How?"

Luke looked up at her and smiled slightly. Â "How long were you listening?"

"I got there around the time the Mother Dragon showed up. Â Now tell me what happened."

" 'A trial of blood to cleanse a soul of guilt, and another of anger.' Â She healed me, Leia, and she could have explained why which would have stopped Cyan from attacking her, and would have made him stop you from attacking her.Â Because there was a battle you two worked together, he forgot to be angry at you and you forgot to feel guilty."Â Luke nodded to himself as if explaining it to her had affirmed it for him. Â "You see, she heeled me, and she heeled you two all at the same time.Â At least I think," he added, giving Leia a sidelong glance.Â "At least, Cyan doesn't hate you anymore."

"So that's it?" Leia demanded.Â "She just decided, 'well, if I make them both attack me together and beat the shit out of them, then they'll have to get along'?"

Luke shook his head.Â "Not her, Fate decided.Â Something beyond what we understand of the Force and the Universe, maybe even beyond what the Jedi of old knew.Â She didn't know what the outcome would be, but whatever it was, did."

They rode in silence for a time until Luke looked at Leia and said, "Leia, I need to ask you something.Â And give me your honest response, I don't care how it makes you look. Â I just need to know the truth."Â Leia nodded hesitantly.Â "Why did you take Cyan away from me?Â What drove you to it?Â This all has just been, well, not something you would do."

Leia took a long time in answering, still in the process of sorting everything out for herself.Â "Paranoia? Â I'm still not sure myself.Â I just kept seeing things, like, the way he'd say something, or a gesture that seemed not quite completely sincere. Â He just . . . he was just too good to be true, you know? Â And I kept having these dreams of terrible things to come. Â I know now that it was because of what I did, but I didn't know then.Â I thought that it was Cyan that would do something since the dreams started the day he arrived." Â Leia paused, struggling to find the

words to express what she had done and how sorry she was, but could find nothing strong enough. "I figured if I put him in the carbonite, than he wouldn't be harmed, and he couldn't harm any of us. Even if you and everyone else hated me for the rest of my life, I'd rather you alive to hate me." Leia looked at Luke imploringly now, willing him to understand, "I knew doing it that you would be angry with me, even if it turned out I was right, and I knew the others would force me to release him. That's why I made the deception. It would give me and you time to sort things out, to figure out if he was the real deal or not, without outside influence or quarreling."

"But then I collapsed," Luke put in, his expression unreadable.

"Right," Leia continued. "I honestly thought you had just gone into shock. So I told Gremtak and his people to move Cyan to a safe house while I tried to get you to the med-centre. After that, you wouldn't speak to me, or you were trying your best to kill me. And then at Constan Prime, I just gave up. I'd give it one more go and if you still didn't respond, I'd let Cyan go. I'd rather take my chances with him than let you live out the rest of your life the way you were. Of course, it was too late then and if it hadn't been for Cyan, you'd be dead."

"Look, I know you're still angry at meâ€"you have every right!â€"and in hindsight I really can't understand what drove me to this in the first place. Â I had really did have good intentionsâ€" "

"The road to hell is paved in good intentions," a vaguely familiar voice said from the other side of Leia.Â She jumped and looked at the dragon, realizing it was the diamond that had confronted her on her first trip to K'ti'ma V. Â He smiled easily at her and added, "Don't worry, I don't represent anything that concerns you anymore today."

Leia relaxed slightly and then looked at Cyan, all the while marveling that the dragons could so easily forgive her.Â Cyan was watching her closely, but she could no longer sense the out right hostility that had come from him before. Â Now it was a kind of wariness, or perhaps worry. Â Leia let her eyes drop to her brother and saw him gazing at the ground, pondering.Â She touched his shoulder and asked hesitantly, "Luke?Â Is that it?Â Does that make sense? Â It's the only way I can think to put it in words."

He looked up and took a gusty breath. "It's a lot to mull over. And I honestly don't think things will ever go back to the way they were, no matter how much we might have tried. I can't condone what you did, but at least I can sort of understand it now." He shook his head, seemingly at a loss. "It's a lot to mull over."

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Mara waited on the tarmac of the sky platform, an expression of barely restrained fury keeping anyone from attempting to even stand beside her. She started to tap her foot impatiently and it was like the steady beat of a drum, sending a man to the execution block.

"Next time he's in a hospital, I'm strapping him to the bed."

Corran covered his mouth with his hand and made a polite little cough to cover his grin. "I'm sure he's alright."

"No, he isn't," Mara growled. "He's going to limp off that ship with a ruptured spleen, or missing another hand, or a punctured lung, or a concussion—he really has had too many of those to be good for him."

Karrde, who was the only person there willing to stand within striking distance of the angered wife, leaned towards her and commented, "Last I checked, one wasn't all that good for you."

Mara turned blazing green eyes on her former employer, whipping around to face him as she growled, "If you make one more wisecrack, I'm going to put you back in a coma you'll never come out of."

"Hush, Mara," Han said, eyes turned skyward. "Luke said he wasn't hurt when he contacted us a couple of hours ago—"

"Since when does he tell us when he's hurt?"

"—and since Cyan said he was fine, then Luke must be all right," Han finished, ignoring the interruption.

"Cyan wouldn't lie about his padmiri being hurt unless there was a very good reason," Olive added helpfully. "He was sitting on his haunches with his arms tucked neatly against his chest, his upper body and neck stretched as high as they would go (the entire process bringing him up to the extraordinary height of Corran's waist)."

"An excellent point, Ollie. Too bad Mara isn't exactly in the mood to except logic at the moment," Corran commented. Mara turned her scathing expression on him and was about to say something when Corran gestured upward with his eyes, "Good thing they're back."

Everyone followed his gaze to watch the Millennium Falcon enter the lower atmosphere of Coruscant, looked undamaged—at least, as undamaged as the Falcon ever looked. It docked with the sky platform without any obvious problems and then settled into its cool down process. As soon as the Falcon was firmly attached, the sky platform started its ponderous journey to the med.-center docking bay. The medics were prepared to charge up the ramp to see to the two confirmed injured passengers, but a single look from Mara stopped them from running ahead of her. Then the hatch lowered.

Luke walked down with his arm supporting Leia, who seemed barely able to step with him. As Han watched their progress, his heart lurched with immense relief. None of her injuries looked to be life threatening, and better yet, Luke even laughed at something she said when they caught sight of Mara storming towards them. Mara reached them and took a deep breath to start into her lecture that Luke, with an unconcerned smile, smothered with a gentle kiss. When he was done, Mara stood on the ramp saying nothing, just looking really flustered and then amazed when she noticed what Han had seen before.

Once the medics had Leia, Luke pulled Mara up the ramp without a

word, and put his finger to her lips when she tried again to speak. The rest followed and Han took a compulsory look around to make sure his ship was all right, and then stopped when he saw Cyan. The dragon was considerably more battered than Leia. His bronze skin was ripped and seared, the underdeveloped sapphire scales underneath peeking through with tantalizing brilliance. His tail was now adorned with several tooth marks, and his wings were shredded in places. The tiny scales around his left eye were puffy and slightly discolored with a couple of welts across his snout for good measure. And last, but certainly not least, there was a bacta pack attached to his abdomen where great claws had penetrated both layers of scales.

Han opened his mouth to ask what happened but Cyan cut him off, "One word about your precious ship and I'll limp over there and beat you with my broken arm. And I have two elbows now so I can really whip it around."

"Actually, I was about to ask what ran you over," Han said, crossing his arms. Cyan growled and aimed a half-hearted swatch at Han's arm but Luke stopped him and threw a lopsided grin at his brother-in-law over his shoulder.

"We had a bit of a . . . confrontation with the Mother Dragon. But it had its purpose," Luke said. "C'mon, you guys, we have to figure out a way to get Cyan out of here and into a bacta tank."

Mara looked at Cyan dubiously, "How did you get him in here in the first place?"

"A kindly emerald dragon of considerable girth was nice enough to stuff me in. Unfortunately, he was a bit too big to bring back with us, so we'll have to find another to drag my hide out," Cyan explained.

Karrde suggested facetiously, "I don't suppose anyone has a loud lifter with them?"

"Just a minute, I'll pull one out of my ass," Corran said, looked at his posterior expectantly.

"Perhaps you should just let us use a large stretcher?" a Mon Calamari paramedic cut in as she skillfully zigzagged her way through the crowd of people and motioned for two of her coworkers to come forward with the proffered stretcher.

Cyan shook his head firmly, even as he was assisted onto the litter. "Absolutely out of the question; makes way to much sense to do that. Besides, that makes life easy, and we're not allowed to do anything of the sort around here. When we try, we wind up in no end of trouble, trust me."

"Then maybe we should just let you walk?" the Mon Calamari asked tersely.

"No, I'm sure Fate will get back at me for the free ride latter," Cyan assured her. "Probably in the form of an infected wound, or maybe one of the repulsor coils will fail on the way there and I will have to walk anyway. Yes that's it. Don't bother to hurry after

me, Luke, you'll find me spiraling on the tarmac on your way there."

"Alright, you go on then and I'll catch up later," Luke said with a chuckle. The paramedic rolled her bulbous eyes and started dragging the stretcher back to the med.-center.

"What happened," Mara finally asked. "You look great, but they're beaten to hell."

Luke shrugged. "Fate works in strange ways to us who cannot see the whole picture." Luke slipped his arm around her waist and touched the two lives growing within her, glorying in the fact that such an act no longer cause him pain. Mara stepped away from him abruptly and cupped his face in her hands.

"You're healed!" she exclaimed. "You can use the Force again! How is that possible?"

Luke smiled and put his arm around her waist again. "Why do you think I went?"

"You're in a pretty good mood," Karrde comment, remembering how he had been just before the banquet. "Especially considering you just spent several hours alone in a ship with Leia."

Luke shrugged again, looking off in the direction the medics had taken his sister, "It wasn't so bad."

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"Show him, child, show him your trick."

Grand Elder Quarrcta di Donna smiled pleasantly at the human toddler and folded his hands on his lap. The boy looked up at the Chiss man and then crossed his arms, looked down at the floor plates and pursed his lips, stubbornly refusing to respond. Quarrcta frowned and then turned displeased eyes on the Ketchi, a word that when translated into basic literally meant "keeper of lost souls". It was a title given to a Cragon priest who dedicated hisâ€"or herâ€"self to the care of an abandoned child. Of course, this child hadn't exactly been abandoned, but that certainly was not the only thing special about the little boy by a long shot.

Ketchi Gu ti Kaiji nudged the boy and said more firmly, "Show him what you can do, Ben." Ben shook his head and settled his small body solidly in place, quite prepared to wait for hours. Ketchi Gu hissed in annoyance, it looked very bad for him to have his ward misbehave in such a way, especially in front of the leader of his people and untainted descendent of Creeta di Donna. It was no more comforting to know that this was the usual state of affairs that when they went head to head, the boy won more times than Ketchi Gu would like to think about.

"Oh, just get Harsa," Quarrcta snarled, knowing this would only lead into a battle of wills with only one obvious winner. Ketchi Gu cuffed the boy's ear and tersely told him not to move from that spot. A useless order given that the child looked ready to stay there for the rest of the day. A short time latter Ketchi Gu returned with

the disgraced Commander framed by his grim faced guards.

Harsa's face was gaunt, and his eyes were blood shot and the skin around them was puffy, but he walked with his head held high and a kind of purpose which told everyone there that though he was beaten, he was far from defeated. Â He was stopped beside Ben and looked at Quarrrcta di Donna without respect, but also without disgust.Â It was almost a look of someone who was gazing upon an underling whom he had never seen before.

"Harsa, the child is being disobedient again," Quarrrcta said, eager as always to get down to business quickly so that Harsa was out of his sight before his strange gaze could cause him too much discomfort.

"What would you like me to do, Sir?" Harsa said with just enough respect so as to not sound bitter.Â Quarrrcta ground his teeth, no amount of punishment had been able to rid the man of that tone.Â "Beat him with a dewbeck prod?"

Quarrrcta curled his lip, struggling to keep from having this man killed. Â If he did, they'd never get the child to do anything. Â "Ketchi Gu wants him to show me his trick, but Ben doesn't want to listen to him. Â Perhaps he will listen to you better?"

"What makes you say that, Sir?Â Ketchi Gu spends much more time with him than I do," Harsa said in the same indifferent voice.

Quarrrcta narrowed his eyes, moments from losing his temper and having Harsa and Ben killed, just to get his blood pressure back down to healthy levels. Â "Than perhaps you should spend more time with him. Â Of course, this would mean spending less time with a certain someone else . . ." Â Harsa's face paled visibly but it was Ben who reacted first.

"We're 'round Kellonia," Ben said sourly, finally looking up at Quarrrcta, his expression surpassingly composed.

"An intelligent child, to be sure," Quarrrcta said, pleased but at the same time worried about what this new skill portended. Â The boy had plucked their location from the minds of someone on this bridge crew, and he could not have been told before since no one else on the ship, Cragon's Pride , knew where they were.Â "Now tell me, little one, where is the one we seek?"

Ben didn't answer for a time, then he looked up at Harsa, who was staring straight ahead, the only indication of his anxiety was the constriction of his neck muscles.Â Then Ben looked at the blue sphere of Kellonia seen in the wide view port for a moment and his eyes lost all focus.Â Then he turned back, took a deep breath of resignation and said, "Kel-Sol."

Quarrrcta turned his eyes to his research officer questioningly. Â "Kel-Sol is a city on the Eastern continent. Â Fairly large, but we should be able to find him without much trouble."

"Splendid!" Quarrrcta exclaimed, clasping his long fingers together and beaming at the boy.Â "See how easy that was? Â I'll tell you what, why don't you spend the rest of the day with Harsa, while you're both around since you were such a good boy? Â You'd like

that, I bet."

Ben looked at him for a second, then almost smile and wrapped his small hands around Harsa's big one and nodded. "When he did, Ketchi Gu came forward and murmured in Quarrrcta's ear in the Cragon religious tongue, "Are you sure that is wise?" The child was disobedient, he should be punished, not rewarded."

"That method has yet to work with him. Besides, he relented in the end, I choose to take that as a good sign. And he obviously has become attached to Harsa. If we give them more time together, than maybe he'll become more agreeable his training." Ketchi Gu looked at him dubiously and then shrugged. Quarrrcta's decisions were final, and to disagree more would be seen as a great insult and one did not last long in the Cragon upper echelons by insulting the leader of their dynasty.

"I am forever your servant, you Excellency," Ketchi Gu uttered the formal sentence and lead Harsa and Ben out. The boy turned back to look and Quarrrcta as he left, and the leader of the Cragon was sure he smiled in triumph.

> <p class="MsoBodyTextIndent2"> T h e R o a d t o H e l l

> Chapter VIII<p>

"Here."

"What's this?" Luke asked as Mara handed him a data pad with a card already inserted. They stood on top of the building that housed their apartment. Luke held a cup of hot chocolate in one hand and used the free one to view the document. Cyan was next to him, peeking over his padmiri 's shoulder with interest. The dragon was looking quite bedraggled at the moment. No amount of time spent in the bacta tank seemed able to heal the slash marks crisscrossing his body. So the doctors, fearing that so much exposure might damage the newly forming skin underneath, took a cauterizer to his scales with the enthusiasm of a mad seamstress. Consequently, Cyan now had the appearance of an evil rag doll.

"You never heard about this?" Mara asked. Luke shrugged, scanning the contents. "Not surprising. A Mon Calamari ship designer caught wind of our idea of a mobile Jedi Academy and set to designing a ship for just such a purpose. Some exceedingly well off philanthropists heard about it and started funding its construction. This all started around the same time you and I were imprisoned on the Threnody. I guess in all the excitement, no one bothered to tell you when you got back. Anyway, they've just sent us a communiqu   to inform us that the ship is near completion and they want you to name her."

Luke turned to her in amazement. "They finished construction on a ship of this size?" he indicated the data pad that contained the specs for the ship, "in so short a time?"

"Love, it has been almost two years since then," Mara said with a bemused smile.

"Great horny nerfs, it couldn't have been that long," Cyan exclaimed.

"Could it?"

Mara laughed at the disconcerted expression mirrored on both of their faces. "Check the dates on the card. A great many things have happened between then and now."

"Great stars," Luke murmured, his eyes suddenly becoming troubled. Cyan turned to his padmiri in worry and rumbled questioningly.

"What is it?" Mara asked, catching on to Cyan's concern.

"It's just . . ." Luke paused, struggling for a moment. "Ben! How could we leave him for so long? Who knows what's been happening to him? And how could I have been out of control for so long? Sith spit!" He set the data pad down on the ledge with a clatter and rubbed his eyes as he turned away from the glittering cityscape as if the lights were suddenly an affront to him.

Mara turned with him and caught his arm in her's. "You had a lot of problems through those two years. You wanted to go after Ben even when we were still on Tatooine, but you didn't know how."

Luke rounded on her, suddenly angry. "Well, I should have found a way! He's our son and we just left him out there to who knows what!"

"Remember what the Dream told us, Luke. Be mindful of your past, but not at the expense of the moment. Here, now, we can go find Ben," Cyan said, laying a restraining paw on Luke's arm that instantly had a calming effect on him. "And it seems to me," he added, picking up the data pad, "that we now have a very snazzy new form of transportation there."

Luke looked from one companion to the other and threw up his arms in disgust. "You two aren't going to allow me a moment's guilt, are you?"

"No," Mara said simply.

"Why should you?" Cyan demanded. "You were clinically insane. You can't even be tried for any of the things you've done."

"That doesn't exactly make me feel better," Luke muttered cynically.

Mara cupped his face in her hands and frowned. "Well, what do you want us to say? Yes, you are a horrible person and all of the stuff that happened is your fault and no one else's, and you should be flogged and stoned until you're nothing but a lifeless hulk."

"There," Luke said with a smile and a peck on her cheek, "that wasn't so hard, now was it?"

"Oh, please. Such displays of self-deprecation are both unbecoming and useless. Not to mention terribly annoying. Here, drink," Mara added, tipping Luke's mug to his lips. "Chocolate is the solution to all the universe's problems, as long as you're drinking, nothing can be bad. There, now let's go down stairs, brainstorm some names

for that ship, then figure out who we want to drag along with us to the great black pit among the stars."

Luke glared at them both, resentfully aware that he was being coddled and resentfully aware that he needed it.

"We're not going to solve anything on a roof top," Cyan said with a gentle smile. "Besides, Mara's right. Chocolate is the solution to all the universe's problems, and there's more in the cupboard."

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Around evening the next day Mara and Cyan—who graciously offered to give her a "lift" there—strode into the hanger that housed Rouge Squadron's compartment of X-Wings. Any simulations or practicing currently being done by the Squadron seemed to be finished by then so most of the pilots had left to attend to other business. All that remained were some tech personal, droids, and a few pilots who were actually seeing to their own craft.

Mara was just looking around, trying to find the telltale green of Corran's X-Wing when a man sidled up to her. He was around her age and even though he sported craggy wrinkles around his eyes and graying black hair he still managed the illusion of everlasting youth (at least mentally).

"You know, I never thought I'd say this about a woman, but you've got a really nice looking lightsaber," he said with a grin.

Mara sighed and glared at her husband's old friend and long time member of Rogue Squadron not to mention irrepressible prankster. "For the last time, Janson, grow up."

"Well, what's the fun in that?" Wes Janson demanded, looking flabbergasted that anyone would even suggest such a thing.

"Exactly," Cyan agreed. "Childhood is a time of happiness and bliss. Adulthood is just plain gloomy and boring. Why would you willingly want to grow up? Seriously, adulthood is highly overrated."

Mara turned from one to the other and shook her head ruefully. "I'm surrounded by adolescents. At least Cyan has the excuse of actually being one." Janson shrugged indifferently to the insult. "Is Corran here?"

"Yup," Janson bobbed his head in affirmative. "Over on Landing Block L-D. I think he's trying to teach Ollie how to fix an X-Wing."

"Oh, Mother of Dragons, this should be interesting," Cyan commented as they left the grinning pilot. They reached the area Janson indicated and stopped to watch. Corran's X-Wing had green stripes running down the sides and garnishing the wings as opposed to Rogue Squadron's usual red color. Mara had always thought this amusing, since Corran's flight suit was green, his best clothes were green, and his eyes were green. Now it seemed there was a new addition, a small, stubby green tail sticking up from the socket that usually

housed Corran's R2 unit (which, not surprisingly at all, was also green).

Corran was squatting beside the young dragon, patiently describing what he should be doing and why.Â Mara smiled, seeing Olive's tail wag in excitement and interest when he finally understood what Corran was explaining.

"I think Ollie's been adopted," Mara murmured to Cyan.Â He just rumbled and shrugged, looking unimpressed.Â Mara glanced at him sharply, wondering from where the dragon's cold attitude had arrived.

Corran was reaching for a tool when he saw them approaching.Â "Hey, look who's here, Ollie!"Â Olive withdrew his head from the R2 socket and let out a frightened squawk and leapt into the cockpit.Â Corran looked down at the baby dragon in perplexity.Â "Um . . ."

"Typical emerald," Cyan commented with a snort.Â "They are the most cowardly of the dragons," he commented as if that should have explained everything.

"That's not a fair generalization, Cyan.Â I've seen him do plenty of brave things," Mara said disapprovingly.

Cyan shrugged.Â "Only because Fate forced him to."

"He's a child, Cyan, that's no reason to insult him," Corran said as he leaned into his cockpit.Â "C'mon out, Ollie, Cyan won't hurt you.Â He might sound mean, but it's all just piss in the wind, I promise."Â Olive firmly shook his head and scurried under the seat as he could get.

"He displeases me.Â He had better not be coming with us," Cyan growled succinctly.

"With you where?" Corran asked.

Mara grinned.Â "Why, out into the boonies of the universe, of course."

"Huh?"

"We're trying to get some people together for a little trip into the Wilder Regions.Â Luke wants to know if you're in.Â Come on, Corran, you up for a little adventure?" Cyan dared with his usual impish grin.

Corran shrugged.Â "Of course, I'd love to help in any way.Â But I need to get the leave."

"Shouldn't be too much of a problem.Â Wedge is in charge of that, isn't he?" Mara asked.

Corran nodded.Â "Yes, but I think we have a mission coming up.Â Raiders near the Imperial Remnant border or something.Â We might be going out, sort of a good will thing, trade back for the help they sent to Tatooine."

"Oh," Mara said, crestfallen.

"That's ok, Mara," Cyan said cheerfully. "I'm sure you can seduce him into it."

Mara glared at Cyan. "I am not going to seduce Wedge into doing anything!"

"You say that like it's a bad thing," a voice suddenly said from behind her, making her jump and spin around.

"Wedge!" Mara exclaimed, embracing him briefly. "Sorry, you came in at the wrong part of that conversation."

"Obviously. Though, I'm guessing the part I was supposed to come in at was the 'Corran needs leave and Wedge is the one who can give it to him' part?" Wedge asked, smiling.

Mara put her fists on her hips and glared at him. "How long have you been standing there?"

"Most of the conversation," Cyan said.

"You knew?" she demanded. Cyan shrugged. "Then why didn't you tell me?" Cyan shrugged again. Mara glared at for a second and then punched him in the shoulder hard enough to make the thick-skinned dragon grunt.

"Pregnant women," Cyan muttered with a long-suffering sigh.

"What!" Mara exclaimed.

"I saidâ€œ"

"I heard youâ€œyou glorified toad!" Mara growled and lunged at him. Cyan, with the same mischievous grin on his lips, hopped nimbly out of the way and hid behind some crates. Mara chased him for a moment before she realized how silly must she look and stopped. "Well fine then. You go on and run. And you can just stay there for the rest of the day! Yeah."

Wedge took a moment to compose his features, knowing all too well how a woman reacts to having The Comment made to her. He was married, he had learned the hard way. "Anyway, I can't give Corran leave with a mission coming up this close unless someone of equal or higher rank needs him."

"Oh," Mara said, crestfallen again.

"Of course, that could be a lot of people," Wedge continued. "General Cracken, General Ges Liuy . . ." he paused and looked at Mara meaningfully, ". . . even the head of the Rep/Imp Intel Group . . ."

Mara frowned and then caught on. "Karrde! Oh, that makes sense. Stars, why didn't I think of that? I really have had too much on my mind. He'd want in on this anyway. Thanks, Wedge."

"No problem. Uh, I have to go though. Someone told me they saw Wes sneaking an ewok mask in here and I have this sinking feeling he's going to jump out from somewhere with in on just to shorten my

life expectancy by another couple of decades." Â Wedge waved cheerfully and then departed.

Mara snorted, "Good luck!"

As soon as they brought their idea to Karrde, he agreed to send the request out for Corran's aid on the grounds that Corran was the only military person going that had actually been there before. Â This was just to assure anyone who found out about their little excursion that it wasn't just a bunch of important people running off into Unknown space for the stars only knew what. Â One thing Luke would always lament about the end of the Rebellion was that it was decidedly more difficult to commandeer personal for random missions.

Luke decided to send in a small exploratory force to Kellonia before they took the main ship in, much like they had when searching for the Threnody. Â In the end the only people who were going were Luke, Mara, Cyan, Corran, Olive (once Luke convinced Cyan to let him), Jaina, and, oddly enough, Deacon.

"There's lot's of reasons," Luke told Mara after he had informed her and everyone else of his decision to include him. Â "He's smart, resourceful, adapts to new cultures wellâ€"which will be a great asset where we're going.Â We're going to need some non-Jedi on this. Â Actually, we're just plain going to need as much support as we can scrounge up."

"But isn't he still in custody for assaulting the President of the New Republic?" Han asked meaningfully.Â Luke grinned at his expression, which seemed normal enough. Â Yet all the while he and most everyone else was wondering what had happened between him and Leia.Â When pressed about it they would both just shrug and say they were talking.

Cyan shook his head.Â "He's being released on account of they can't prove that he knew he was firing on Leia."

"He has nothing to go back to," Luke said, turning imploring eyes on Mara when he caught her disapproving glance.Â "Everyone we grew up with is dead.Â I saw him this morning and he said he didn't even want to go back to Tatooine. Â I mean, what would he have to do? Â No one wants to hire a former rebel. Â He's my oldest remaining friend, Love," Luke added, giving his wife his best pleading look when he saw her about to waver. Â "I can't just abandon him."

"Stop looking at me like that!Â If you think he should come, than fine," Mara relented.

Corran grinned and shrugged.Â "Could be worse.Â Could be Camie."

"Bite your tongue," Mara growled with a sidelong glance at Luke.

"It's alright, Mara," Luke said, though his smile had lost some of its enthusiasm. Â "I think she would have found that funny."

After arranging with Leia to put in a few words in defense of Deacon at his final hearing, he was released without much complaint and

quite happily accepted Luke's offer to join them.Â It wasn't long after he joined them, they were supplied and all set to head out.

"I still say we should have taken the Falcon ," Han growled as they all piled into an old Coiser class assault shuttle.

"Dad, the Falcon probably wouldn't have even made it all the way out to Kellonia, let alone the fact that it's probably the most recognizable ship in the galaxy," Jaina said.Â After Jacen and Anakin returned to Yavin IV to help Kam Sulusar and his wife, Tionne, with some minor disturbance at the academy, Jaina was left on Coruscant with nothing to do. Â So Mara, upon realizing that she was going to be alone on a shuttle with a bunch of male pilots (or the next best thing, a former swoopie), she quickly nabbed her the young Jedi as soon as she found out Jaina was free. Â She'd been feeling a little guilty for neglecting her apprentice anyway.

Â "Besides, Han, do you really want to see what happens when I get crammed into close quarters with a bunch of guys when I'm pregnant?" Mara had pointed when he tried to argue against it.

"Great leaping fire monkeys," Corran exclaimed. Â "That's a scary thought, even without you being pregnant."

"What a piece of junk!" a voice shouted from outside the ship after they had finished loading everything.

Cyan gave Han a facetious grin.Â "I didn't know the Falcon was in this hanger."

". . . she doesn't look like much, but she's a solid little ship," Luke was saying to Deacon as they made their way up the boarding ramp.

Deacon nodded, but still looked a little dubious. Â "What was her name again?"

"Rancor's Bane ," Corran supplied.Â He paused and wondered what the other man was thinking when he turned surprised eyes on him.Â "Hey, Deacon."

"Hello, Corran," Deacon said after a moments pondering, as if he was deciding whether or not to forgive him in that very instant. Â "And Mara," he added with a tentative smile.

Mara smiled warmly back and settled on a couch in the small lounge. Â "They patched you up quite nicely," she said, gesturing to his abdomen.

"Huh?" Deacon asked, looking down at his stomach as if the answer were written on it.Â "Oh, the blaster wound. Â Yeah, I guess they did.Â You alright?"

Mara flashed him one of her most feral grins. Â "Never better."

Luke grinned and started to lead Deacon to the sleeping quarters. Â "They treat ya pretty nice 'round here. Â It's a little different than we're used too. Â Slap us in a cell, throw in a few bacta packs and hope ya live 'till morning."

"Ah, that was the life," Cyan said, following them out.

Corran watched them go and then shook his head and said, "This is going to be weird."

Mara sighed, "No kidding.Â But Luke is right, we can't just send him off with nowhere to go. Â He took me on like it was nothing and tried real hard to take care of everyone when Luke would go off on a bender. Â Now what's he got for it?Â It's mostly out fault that Camie and Fixer and Windy were killed."

"Don't start laying blame, Mara," Jaina admonished with mock severity. Â "A great and wise Jedi Master once told me that laying blame is like trying to understand a Corellian, you just can't do it without a big headache, and no good will come of it anyway."

" 'Great and wise Jedi Master'?Â My, you've trained my daughter well," Han said, rolling his eyes.

"I think so."

Just then Deacon, Luke and Cyan left the sleeping quarters as Deacon was asking, "Not that I want to start something, but who's flying this bucket of bolts?"

"Uh . . . I would but I don't know if Han could stomach that one," Luke said with a grin.

"Actually," Mara interrupted, "I think that Jaina should fly. Â It would be a good experience."

Jaina frowned at her aunt.Â "I've flown shuttles before."

Mara shook her head.Â "You haven't proved yourself a true pilot until you can survive a trip with these three backseat drivers in the cockpit with you," Mara said, gesturing to Luke, Corran, and Han.Â All three men managed to look equally offended all at the same instant.

"That sad part is, she's right," Cyan said, just barely missing stepping on Olive who was cowering in the middle of the floor, scared out of his wits.

Jaina looked at the group of friends and family dubiously. Â "It couldn't possibly be that bad."

> <p class="MsoBodyTextIndent2"> Chapter IX<p>

"I'm never flying with you again, Dad," Jaina said tersely as they exited the shuttle.Â She turned to her Master. Â "Aunt, you or one of those nut cases can fly that bucket of bolts back."

"And she didn't believe us," Luke said, grinning at his wife.

Mara shrugged, "The child is young to the universe, she's soon realize all the pains of associating with combat trained pilots."

"There's more?" Jaina exclaimed, dismayed.

"Oh, darling," Mara said, putting her arm around her young apprentice, "what you've seen is just the tip of the ice burg. Â There's really no better test of one's patience than I know of. Â But think of it this way, if you ever want to be in a fighter squadron, if you can put up with these nut jobs, you can put up with any pilot under the sun."

"So where do we stop first?" Han asked, ignoring his daughter's discomfort and Mara's unflattering statement.

"I say we go to the bar we went into the last time we were here," Corran suggested, shouldering a pack to carry the short-winded Olive. Â "Find Yeema and see what he can tell us."

They returned to the bar and sat down, looking for any sign of the long legged, blue skinned alien.Â They squeezed into a booth near the back of the cantina where they could get a clear view of everyone there, but it was harder to spot them. Â As they waited they all became aware of a tension in the air. Â The patrons seemed jumpy and even more quick to draw their blasters than they had been before.Â Everyone would anxiously glance at the door as if expecting their doom to come strolling in at any moment.Â

This did nothing to ease Corran's fears, the fright he received on their first visit returning to settle like lead in the pit of his stomach. Â He was seated on the end of the booth and was just sipping the bitter brew the natives were so fond of in an attempt to calm his nerves when he was roughly hauled out of his seat and dragged to the conveniently close back door.

He could hear commotion behind him as he was pulled into an ally behind the cantina.Â As soon as his assailant's grip on his shirt collar weakened, Corran twisted around and brought his lightsaber out and ignited it all in one smooth motion. Â The assailant stopped and stared at the glowing blade; at least Corran assumed that was what he was looking at. Â A heavy green cloak, splattered with dirt and, in some places blood, obscured the figure.

Even before Corran could take in these details, the others had rushed out after them and were now surrounding the assailant. Â He turned his hooded head around to view the group, and then nodded, as if this was exactly as he had expected. Â Then he shrugged the hood back.

"Yeema!" Corran exclaimed, exasperated.Â "What is it with you and sneaking up on me?"

The blue skinned creature shook his head, wiggling the multitude of tentacles protruding from his mouth.Â "This one is not Yeema today."

"You aren't?" Han asked, peering closer.Â It certainly looked like Yeema.

"Yeema's body it be, but a different soul speak to you," Yeema's body said pithily.

Luke extinguished his blade and regarded the alien seriously.Â "What



is the name of this soul?Â And why have you taken Yeema's body?Â We have a need to speak to him about something very important to us."

"No, speak to Yeswa you need," Yeema said, pointing a slender finger at his chest.Â "Yeswa it was who tell great story of Jedis."

"Was it now?Â You wanna explain how that works?" Corran asked, remembering how much the story had disturbed him. Â "You've got quite the story telling skills for someone with multiple personalities."

"Corran!" Mara hissed.

But Yeswa waved the comment off and explained, "Yeswa's people, Wollies, never really die.Â Our children carry the souls of all their ancestors, so nothing is lost. Â Yeswa is Yeema's ancestor many, many times removed. Â Yeswa is old, very old, older than most things left, but there be great need for Yeswa to tell Jedi the prophecy and so Yeswa lives."

"Indeed," Cyan said, "and I would wager that Yeswa is around twenty five thousand years old."Â Yeswa nodded. Â Cyan turned to Corran and added, "That's why his story was so disturbing, it was a first person account."

Corran turned to the alien and swallowed, even the memory of the feelings that had come to him when the story was told made him shiver. Â "What is this prophecy, Yeswa?"

"The Blue knows part, and the sightless one has heard it, though he may not understand," Yeswa said, gesturing to Corran. Â Luke and Cyan jerked at that reference and traded glances. Â "But you all must know, for you are all wrapped up in it, even you." He added, pointing a withered arm at Deacon. Â Suddenly Yeswa turned and looked up the ally towards the street. Â "But not here.Â They be looking for Yeswa.Â The di Donna remember Yeswa well, the di Donna know the danger of Yeswa knowing and the di Donna remember past transgressions for long time. Â We must go."

"C'mon, we can go to our ship then," Mara said. Â " They'll have trouble finding you there. Â Does Yeswa think Yeswa can find the way to the Ship Port from here without being seen?"

"Yeswa knows Yeswa can."

They made it to the Rancor's Bane without being followed.Â As soon as they entered, Yeswa immediately raided the pantry, and then settled in on the couch in the lounge.Â Corran let Olive hop out of the bag as soon as they were inside and the baby dragon hopped onto the table and watched Yeswa curiously.

"You're the betrayer, aren't you," Olive said after a time. Â Yeswa nodded but did not stop devouring the food he had pilfered. Â "Than that is why the di Donna want to hurt you."

Yeswa shook his head and finally stopped eating long enough to answer, "Not just hurt Yeswa, little one, but kill Yeswa. Â End the line, so Yeswa will finally die. Â There are no other Yeemas to carry Yeswa's soul."

"You're the betrayer! Well, that explains a lot of things," Cyan said.

"Not to me!" Deacon exclaimed. "What in the Void does this prophecy have to do with me? I'm not even a Jedi. I've already gotten a hell of a lot more involved in this than I'd expected."

Han shook his head. "Don't have to be. Just hang around with Jedi and big things are bound happen to you whether you want them too or not. Even if you tried to get out now, it's too late, trust me," Han added, flashing a grin at Deacon to show that he did not regret being in the same situation a single bit.

"And big things will happen," Yeswa put in. "Yeswa knows."

"Explain the prophecy to us, Yeswa, and what we must do," Luke said, deciding to get right down to the point.

"Yeah, and then tell us where Quarrcta di Donna's ship is so we can get our son back," Mara added. "You found out once, I'm sure you figured it out again. It's half the reason we came to find you. You see, our sâ€œ"

Yeswa shook his head and interrupted her, "Yeswa fears you will not see Ben for many cycles. But no harm has come to him, fear not! To go after him now will only be bringing great pain. The time for his return is not so far off, Yeswa thinks, but great pain will come with that as well."

"Yeswa, we can't just leave him there," Luke said, shaking his head.

Yeswa sighed and reached into his cloak, withdrawing a data pad. "Yeswa knows, for the Son of Suns could do nothing else. Here is access codes to shuttles from Cragon's Pride. It also has orbit schedule, and future flight plan on it."

"Thank you," Mara said solemnly, taking the data pad.

Yeswa settled his lanky frame more firmly into the couch and prepared for a long haul, regrettably setting the food aside. "You will understand most of the prophecy as you come to it. Not even Yeswa remember it all, only the Mother Dragon knows. Go to the world of death, go to world of Cragnal and you find whole prophecy. Yeswa can only tell you this, Jaded Fire and the Son of Suns cannot separate! You must be united when the time of Desolation comes again, or it will not be strong enough, and Cragon will win."

"That's it?" Mara asked, throwing a confident grin at her husband. "Then we don't have to worry."

Luke nodded and slipped an arm around Mara's slowly expanding abdomen. "If we can stick together through what we've just gone through, than I'd have to say it'd be pretty hard to get use to separate."

"No, you don't understand," Yeswa started to say when his eyes caught

sight of the boarding ramp slowly lowering.Â Everyone fallowed his startled gaze and pulled their weapons even as Han jumped for the manual overrideâ€"but it was too late. Â They waited a moment, and no one came up. Â Then the sound of small footfalls clanking against the floor panels echoed towards themâ€|

"Ben!" Mara breathed before the toddler could reach the top of the ramp. Â He stopped and looked at her, his expression mournful. Â Then his eyes turned to his father and for a moment they lit up in surprise, but then his expression became even sadder. Â Luke took a step towards him but a sudden warning in his son's eyes stopped him short from scooping him up.

"I wouldn't move, if I were you," a voice comanded from behind Ben. Â A gun was suddenly pressed against the back of the boy's head, followed by a blue hand attached to a Chiss soldier. Â He gave Yeswa a crooked little smile and added, "Well, Yeema, it's been quite the chase you've put us through, but now your little game of hide-and-seek is over.Â Now, if you would be so kind as to come with us, my little friend here won't get in an 'accident'."

"Yeah, right.Â I think you're a little outnumbered, buddy," Han said, flicking the safety catch off his blaster.

Suddenly Yeswa laughed, and it was the same high-pitched cackle Corran remembered hearing upon first being introduced to Yeema. Â "You be kind to stick up for an old Wollie, good traders, but Yeema thinks it best if Yeema be going with them," Yeswaâ€"or Yeema, whoever it was nowâ€"stepped forward and put his hand on Luke's arm, subtly hiding his lightsaber. Â Luke caught on and quickly motioned with his eyes for Mara and Corran to hide theirs while Yeswa occupied the Cragon. Â They didn't seem to have realized who it was they were dealing with just yet.

Yeswa, the Cragon soldier, and Ben walked slowly down the ramp, Ben looking over his shoulder with his heart in his eyes. Â I'm ok, Da .Â The words came to Luke as clearly as if Ben had spoken them aloud.Â It was all the father could do to keep from jumping in response. Â So much skill and he was what, one, one and a half? Â This was well beyond anything he could have hoped his son would accomplish at that age.

I'll come after you , Luke told him, imbuing the words with as much love and determination as he could muster.Â Ben was almost out of sight but Luke just managed to see him smile.

Mara heard their footsteps change in tone from metal to dirt and suddenly she couldn't stand it anymore.Â Uttering an almost animalistic groan, Mara darted down the ramp. Â She was half way down when Luke and Jaina caught her, the former holding her close and murmuring reassurances in her ear that did no good. Â

Luke's words were cut off when Yeswa suddenly jumped into the air on his spindly legs and kicked the Cragon soldier in the head, soundly knocking him out.Â Then the alien scooped Ben up into his arms and started to make his way back up the ramp again, motioning for Luke and Mara and Jaina to reenter the ship. Â But Yeswa didn't even make it to the ramp before a shot rang out in the crisp air and sliced through his leg. Â He let out a squawk and fell forward, rolling just in time to keep from crushing Ben.Â Luke and Mara and Jaina

were down in an instant, lightsabers' flashing into existence, covering Yeswa's prostrate body.Â Deacon and Cyan hauled Yeswa to his feet while Han picked up Ben, and Corran jumped down to help them cover their retreat back into the ship.

They were almost completely surrounded by Cragon soldiers, each armed and ready, some with Force Inhibitors.Â Han was almost up the ramp when a shot got through the Jedi's defenses and almost took off his foot.Â Han jumped and rolled to the side, promptly falling off the ramp.

"Han!" Luke exclaimed, running towards his brother. Â Corran moved after him, trying to cover up for the gap suddenly left in their defense.Â He had his head turned to watch Luke for just a split second when suddenly something thudded into his neck.Â He reached his hand back to see what it was when Mara suddenly started swearing.Â Corran's eyes suddenly rolled back in his head as he gasped for air and suddenly he collapsed.Â But Mara couldn't spare any more attention on her fallen comrade; the Cragons' blasters were becoming much harder to deflect as one, by one, there became less of them to deflect them.

Jaina moved to cover Corran, sweat trickling down her brow as it became harder and harder to concentrate.Â She'd never been in a prolonged firefight like this before, and it was a test of all her abilities every second.Â Thinking that Uncle Luke's comments that their training at the academy would be seem like nothing compared to the real thingÂ were suddenly making sense, she caught a presence behind her that hadn't been there before.Â Risking a glance back she saw Ben crouch by Corran, petting the Jedi's forehead as he shook in reaction to the Force Inhibitor. Â She looked back further and saw her uncle helping her father to stand.Â Han took a step and then his ankle rolled at an awkward angle and he would have fallen again if it weren't for Luke.Â Jaina gritted her teeth against her first impulse to go help him, she could do more good by staying right where she was.Â She also realized that Ben was safer behind her than he was in the relatively open section Luke and Han were in.

"That's it, Ben," she said, "stay with Corran."

Mara heard her and glanced back, quickly taking in the same situation her niece just had and nodding to herself in agreement. Â Suddenly Cyan and Olive jumped out of the Rancor's Bane and immediately launched themselves into the crowd of Cragons with seemingly suicidal abandon.Â But the blaster bolts that hit the two dragons either ricocheted or were absorbed by the strong scales.Â They sliced, clawed and bit through flesh and bone and spit acid on the soldiers with lethal efficiency.Â Soon the Cragon were scattered about in a desperate attempt to evade the dragons, their carefully formed line of fire destroyed.

Three soldiers unexpectedly jumped towards Jaina. Â Cyan leapt after them, catching one in his bloodstained talons and knocking the other two down with his great bulk. Â They landed beside Jaina, and upon seeing their proximity to the enemy they both instinctively fired.Â Jaina managed to catch one bolt but the other hit her in the side and neatly spun her around before she fell to the ground. Â Seeing the unprotected child and Jedi behind her, they both grabbed one before Cyan could dispatch the other soldier or anyone else could come to their aid.

"STOP!" the soldier holding Ben shouted.Â All the fighting ceased as everyone caught sight of them and realized what had happened.Â Mara crouched by Jaina, helping stem the flow of blood from the wound in her side. Â Cyan hissed and took a menacing step towards one of the soldiers, but the Cragon responded by tightening his finger on the trigger. Â Cyan stopped, lashing his tail back and forth in frustration.

A man with rank cylinders indicating that he was a commander stumbled over to the two soldiers.Â He pat them one at a time with his left hand, since his right arm was now nothing more than a bloodied stump below the elbow.Â "Very good, men.Â Now I say we bring this little skirmish back under our control." Â He turned to Luke.Â "Master Skywalker, isn't it?Â Â Â I suggest you give us Yeema and call off theseâ€"these creatures â€" he gestured disparagingly to Cyan and Olive, "â€"before I let my men give these two a few new holes in their heads. Â We'd like 'em alive, but we'd like ourselves alive a fair bit more."

Luke stared long at the commander, the muscles in his jaw constricting in defeat.Â He could try and pull the blasters from the Cragon soldiers' hands, but he doubted he could do it before they got at least one shot off.Â Everyone was looking at him, and he could see the eagerness of the two soldiers to avenge the losses received in the battle today. Â He looked at Mara, but she refused to look at him, instead she concentrated on Jaina's wound.Â She knew what his choice would be, what it would have to be. Â Luke saw the tears well up, not of sadness as other's might have guessed, not from her, but of frustration and fury as she would never have before guest she had in her.Â Luke turned back to the commander.

"Deal," he said softly.

Han still had his arm around Luke to support his injured leg, but now he hugged his brother tightly, knowing he needed a far different kind of support right now.Â Deacon helped Yeswa down the ramp and over to the commander until another Cragon took the alien roughly away from him.Â The picked Corran's unresponsive body up and dragged Ben behind, fully confident that there would be no strike against them now.

As the Cragon picked up their casualties, Luke kept his arm around Han for mutual support, and gripped the edge of the ramp as hard as he could with his other hand until his knuckles were white. Â He stared at their backs long after they had disappeared from sight.

Corran felt the thing hit his neck, and as soon as he heard Mara's oath, he knew it was an Inhibitor.Â Soon all thoughts of concentrating on anything else except for the sudden searing pain that started from the base of his neck and lanced upwards into his skull were pushed from his mind.Â

The next thing he knew he was lying at the bottom of the ramp and could not move a muscle in his body.Â The metal was cool against his skin but all his other senses seemed somehow dimmed. Â His sight was blurry and all the sounds around him were muffled. Â He could hear something akin to listening to a firefight through a thick duroplast wall.Â It was then that he felt a small hand against his face, and

then they moved down his neck and tried to pry the Inhibitor lose.

"That's it, Ben, stay with Corran," he thought he heard someone say, just barely. And then all he could hear was screams and roaring for several long moments, and suddenly someone grabbed him by his armpits hauled him up, followed by something round being pressed against his temple, probably the barrel of a blaster. He heard people speaking around him and afterward there was complete silence. Then he was picked up by his feet too, and carried away.

He knew he must have traveled some distance by the time he was set down—or rather dropped—on a metal floor. His head hit hard and he cried out involuntarily. He tried to move his hand to feel the extent of the injury but all he could do was make his fingers twitch. His senses were just beginning to come back online when something was pressed against his neck and suddenly everything went black.

The next thing he knew he was awakened by a blinding light. He blinked rapidly to no immediate effect. Gradually he became aware of all the other things around him. He was lying on a comfortable bed and the normal sounds of an operating room could be heard in the background, now suddenly made ominous by their portent. His head throbbed periodically, and he had a funny taste in the back of his mouth that he generally associated with being under a sedative for long periods of time. He forced his eyes to stay open and tried desperately to figure out just where he was and what was about to happen to him.

Then his eyes slowly began to adjust to the light and he saw the blue visage of a Chiss doctor smiling above him. He picked up an instrument that would inject more sedative into Corran and pressed it against the Jedi's neck. The doctor paused for a moment, considering something, and then decided to say something before he put Corran under again.

"Welcome, Jedi, to hell. Through you, my people will rule the galaxy as we were meant too," the doctor said. His smile broadened. "Congratulations."

And then he injected the sedative and all Corran knew was fear and darkness.

> <p class="MsoBodyTextIndent2"> Chapter X<p>

Then he awoke to darkness, darkness unending.

In fact, try as he might, he could not find a single source of light. Which could mean one of two things; he was blind, or he was in a room devoid of windows or any source of light. He suspected the latter, knowing it was a very good scare tactic to use on prisoners and he had been subjected to it once before. He reached his hand up, just to make sure there was nothing just covering his eyes, when he realized he was naked except for a flimsy blanket someone had thought to put on him. He also realized he was very cold, so he pulled the blanket tighter around him. He was on a narrow mattress; to one side of him a cool metal wall, on the other there was nothing but air to meet his outstretched hand. He stretched

out with the Force to see if there was anyone nearby and felt nothing.

At that moment a stab of fear, colder than the air around him, coursed through his body.Â He couldn't feel anything, and it wasn't just other presences in the Force, but the Force itself was blind to him.Â He felt the back of his neck and felt his panic increaseâ€”there was no Force Inhibitor attached. Â He pressed against the skin, thinking they must have implanted it to make sure he couldn't disable it on his own, but he felt nothing unusual. Â He sat up in alarm, or at least tried to, he immediately smacked his head on something cold and hard above him. Â Lying back down, he forced deep breaths into and out of his lungs until he was calm one more.Â It wouldn't do him any good to panic, they were doing this somehow, and they'd just managed come up with something new.Â It was then that he heard the creaking above him, and he realized there was another bunk up there, and it was occupied.

The creaking stopped, followed almost immediately by a pat pat as tiny feet hit the floor beside him, causing him to jump. Â He stayed raised half an inch off the bed, tensed and trying desperately to part the darkness and see who it was.

"Lie down," a soft, childlike voice whispered. Â "You ok.Â Scary, I know, but you ok."

"Who are you?" Corran asked, lying back, but keeping his body tensed, ready to spring at a moment.

There was a pause.Â Then, in a puzzled, almost wounded tone, "You know me.Â Meet me before."

"I can't see you," Corran said, wondering if whoever was talking to him had night vision or something.Â "Is there any way to turn on the lights?"

"Lights are on.Â Always on. Â Never turn them off even if you ask," the voice said, sounding worried. Â Corran felt a small hand touch the back of his neck and now the voice sounded really worried. "Uh, oh."

"'Uh, oh' what?" Corran asked, becoming even more apprehensive than the voice.

There was another small pause, then, "You Jedi, right?"

"Yes," Corran answered cautiously.

There was silence yet again followed by a sad sigh, "No more, no more."

"What are you talking about?" Corran demanded, a quiver entering, unbidden to his voice.Â He reached out his hand and wrapped his fingers around a small arm, suddenly feeling a need for physical contact with someone, anyone. Â "Who are you?Â How do you know all this?"

"I'm Ben.Â An' I know 'cause they tell me.Â They tell me to upset me, 'cause they learned it from me."

"Ben?Â Great stars!" Â He let his hand slide up until he was cupping the small face, round with the infant fat. Corran shook his head, unable believe at first that this child could indeed be Ben.Â The boy sounded as if he were at least two or three years old, not one! Â But Corran could hear in the boy's voice and manner, and feel in his heart that it could be no one else but Ben. Â All of a sudden Corran remember the second thing Ben had said and frowned.Â "What do you mean, learned it from you?Â Learned what from you?"

"Learned 'bout the Force, learned where it come from, how we use it. Â Learned how to take it away," Ben added the last in a very quiet voice, and even though Corran couldn't sense his emotions through the Force, he could hear the deep sense of guilt in the boy's tone.

Corran stroked back Ben's hair, feeling the child trembling beneath his touch. Â "You know, Ben," Corran said, keeping his own rising despair from his voice even as he pieced what had happened to him together in his mind, "I think they're just lying to you to upset you. Â The Cragonâ€" Corran paused, expecting a shutter of revulsion to go through him, swallowing noisily when it didn't, "â€"they learned how to take the Force away a very long time ago, they just had that knowledge taken from them by the Jedi.Â They probably had it just about figured out before you were even born, or maybe even before then.Â You shouldn't blame yourself for this, Ben, that's what they want you to do."

"I know," Ben said very quietly.Â Corran felt his hand move down as Ben sat beside the cot. Â "But that doesn't mean that they're not telling the twuth."

Corran settled back into the mattress and gave Ben what he hoped was a reassuring smile.Â One year old and already taking the woes of the galaxy upon his little shouldersâ€"how like his father he is already! Â "Ben, don't blame yourself, I don't so you shouldn't. Â You've done better than we could have hoped."

Corran sighed when Ben gave no response and closed his eyesâ€"a useless gesture, it suddenly occurred to him.Â He couldn't even understand why they would have done that too him for any other reason besides stupidity or spitefulness.Â He quickly pushed that thought from his mind, bitterness would get him nowhere and Ben would probably pick up on it and it would increase his feelings of guilt.Â

So the Cragon had figured out how to "steal the Force" once more. Â And taking into account what the surgeon had said to him before he was put under again, Corran was their guinea pig. Â At that time a phrase he had heard, oh, it must be more than a year ago, entered Corran's mind, lost among the other great revelations of that day.Â ". . .when the Force is taken away, they cannot live with the grief and they pass on to the Beyond . . ." Â Corran swallowed again, wondering what Yeema, or rather, Yeswa, had meant by those words.Â Was it physically impossible for a Jedi to live after the Force was taken away from them in this way?Â Or did they just enter a depression and kill themselves.Â Perhaps it was both . . .

"No! NO!" Ben suddenly shouted.Â Corran could hear him jump to his feet and a small fist landed on his arm, jolting him from his contemplation.Â "You do none!Â You stay here! Â No leave me



alone!"

Corran reached out again and gave Ben's arm a little shake, disturbed by the terrified tone in Ben's voice. "It's ok, Ben! I'm not going anywhere! I can't!"

"Yes you could. I heard. I heard you think! You could go that way," Ben's voice sounded miserable and helpless, as if he had grown use to having people taken away from him. The thing that surprised Corran the most was that Ben had understood his thoughts so easily. Neither of his parents had a talent for mind reading, at least, as far as Jedi went. This must be something Ben had learned on his own; a way to defend himself against those he was still too weak to fight against on other levels.

"I won't leave you alone, I was just remembering something someone had told me, but I don't feel like they said I would," Corran said reassuringly. He paused, and then asked, "Who left you alone, Ben?"

Ben seemed to take a long time in answering, but when he did, his voice was soft with remembered pain. "First, I was with Da. I . . . I don't 'member much. Just being warm an' happy. Then they took him away an' I was alone. Then I stayed with Wisp. She's my bestest friend in the whole universe. Then they started takin' me 'way from her little bit, then more and more. Now I don't see her at all. Now the only one I see is Mr. Harsa. An' that's only when I help them. Rest of time, I'm with Ketchi Gu. I don't like him. He's mean and makes me do stuff to help them. Like find the guy you were talkin' too on your ship. Rather be alone than do that."

"So why did they put you with me?" Corran asked, appalled at the conditions this poor child was being raised in. "Do you even know?"

He thought he felt Ben nod. "Wanted to see how I get along with other Jedi. Put me with you before they took the Force from you, but you were still asleep, sort of. Probably don't remember."

Corran smiled. "No, I don't, they had me on some mighty good drugs. But, I am well aware of what is going on now, and I have no intention of leaving you. And I can be almost as stubborn as your mother when I want to be so don't you worry about a thing." Corran settled back, feeling Ben relax beneath his hand. He closed his eyes and started to doze when Ben gave him a tentative shake.

"Can I ask you somthin'?"

"Sure thing," Corran responded, snapping back to wakefulness. "What is it?"

"What is my mum like?" Ben asked very tentatively. "Iâ€¦I never got to meet her 'cept at the fight."

Corran smiled, "She is without a doubt one of the most amazing people I will ever know. She's a very strong person, and very powerful in the Force, but she doesn't let that make her arrogant, in fact, she's quite good at taking arrogant people down a peg or two or ten."

She's an excellent fighter and very loyal to those she loves and trusts. Â And as I said, quite stubborn.Â Or maybe determined is a better word. Â When your mother decides to do something, you'd better get out of her way, 'cause she's going to do it.Â Though she's smart enough to know when to stop. Â She ain't the blast 'em up, type either; you won't catch her going into any situation without some sort of plan. Â She's too smart for that.Â The funny thing is, under all that hard-headedness she's very compassionate andâ€œaccording to your father, since she'd never let the rest of us see this in herâ€œvulnerable."Â Corran shook his head in long-standing wonder.Â "Like I said, she's amazing.Â Small wonder your father loves her so much."

"That's my mum?" Ben asked, incredulous and Corran could just imagine the wide-eyed astonishment.

"Uh huh," Corran said, his smile broadening at Ben's reaction. Â "Even without seeing you I can sense some of her in you. Â And I bet you'll be seeing her again soon. Â She and your dad won't let us stay here for long. Â They're quite good at getting people out of messes like this, they've been in them themselves enough to know."

"Really?Â Oh, I hope . . ." Ben's voice trailed off and suddenly he grasped Corran's hand and leaned against the cot, not wanting to leave this person who was the closest he had come to his family in a very long time.Â "I hope you're right."

> <p class="MsoBodyTextIndent2"> Chapter XI<p>

"What did you want to talk to me about?" Mara asked as Luke sealed the hatch to their sleeping quarters on the Rancor's Bane .Â Luke had the expression of someone about to go into a battle he really did not want to fight, but had no choice.

"You know this is going to be dangerous," Luke said evenly, though he rubbed his hands together and creased his brow, a sign Mara had come to recognize as extreme nervousness on his part.

Mara snorted, thought his behavior was beginning to worry her. Â "No kidding.Â I'm still not sure if we'll even be able to make it onto Cragon's Pride."

Luke shook his head.Â "That's not what I wanted to talk about.Â I want to talk about your coming with us, or rather, your not coming with us."

"What do you mean?" Mara asked, a crease appearing between her brows. Â "Not coming with you?Â Of course I'm coming."

"I don't want you to."

"Oh, you don't, do you," Mara said, raising an eyebrow in amusement. Â "Luke Skywalker, you have known me long enough to know that I'm not just some house wife who will go and stay where you pleaseâ€œ"

Luke shook his head again and gave her a small smile. Â "And you know me well enough to know that I wouldn't be stupid enough to think

I could get away with that sort of argument." Â He took her hands in his and continued on, serious once more. Â "The Cragon have proved that they are quite apt at taking us prisoner. Â You know there's every possibility that if we go, we'll be taken as well.Â You stick a Force Inhibitor on us and we're next to useless in a fight." Â Mara opened her mouth to interrupt him but Luke pressed on, not allowing her to speak.Â "What if you're captured?Â We know some terrible things will happen to anyone who's taken, but what about them?" Â Luke took her hands, still held fast in his, and pressed them against her rounded belly.Â "We can't lose anymore of our kids to these guys, I won't let that happen."

"You're right, terrible things will happen to whoever's taken, and if you think I can sit idly by while our son's in danger and you're in thereâ€" Mara began, trying to get her hand loose to shake a finger at him.

"Mara, listen to me," Luke said, holding her hands tightly. Â "It's fine for us to go off and risk our lives because if we get hurt it's generally just us who suffer.Â But you can't think like that anymore!Â You get hurt, so do they, and I don't care what you say, I can't let them, in good conscience, come to harm!Â And you know you can't either, so there's only one choice."

Mara didn't answer right away, she just glared at him, furious that he would do this.Â "How dare you use our children against me!" she hissed.

"I'm not using them against you, Mara," Luke said, his grip on her hand tightening slightly.Â "I just want to protect them.Â You know that if the situation were reversed you'd probably be doing the same to me."

"You do realize that the moment you let go of my hands, I'm going to hit you."

Luke smiled.Â "I know, that's why I'm holding them."

The rest of the group was sitting around the lounge, going over every detail of the plan while they waited for Luke and Mara to finish. Â Suddenly they heard a large crack from their sleeping quarters and Luke cried out.Â Cyan jumped and grunted with the impact he could sense through his bound with his padmiri. Â To everyone's further puzzlement, Cyan grinned and turned his great, wedge shaped head to the door as Luke exited, closing it behind him before Mara could exit.Â He was rubbing his jaw and gave Cyan a sheepish grin and a shrug.

"At least she didn't break anything," Cyan commented.

"Hmmm," Luke said. "Yeah, I think I got off that one a lot easier than I figured I would."

"Got off what?" Jaina asked.

Luke shook his head.Â "Ah, never mind. Â Deak, seeing as you and Olive are staying here, you should know, Mara isn't coming.Â Um, remember our technique for dealing with her when she's hung over?"

"Don't speak unless spoken to and god help ya if you give her any lip?"

"Yeah, I suggest you do that until I'm back," Luke said.

Han was sitting on a small couch with a grin on his face. "Mara's not coming? Hmmm, I wonder whose idea that was?"

Deacon chuckled. "I don't know, but look, is that not a bruise on Luke's face? Isn't that the kind of injury people get after being introduced to Mara's right hook?"

"You know what? I believe you're correct," Han said, sitting up, resting his elbows on his knees and his chin on his hands, regarding his brother with mock curiosity. "That is so interesting. I wonder if Luke knows anything about that?"

"Oh, shut up."

It was easy enough to get to the space station orbiting Kellonia. There were several restaurants and less reputable establishments on board that were popular with the denizens of the backwater world, so there was always discrete passage up. The space station, called Starry Wanderer, was also a place where ships that were never meant to land could dock and allow the crew to "unwind". Cragon's Pride made a stop once an orbit, and dumped most of her crew onboard the station. The men of the Cragon navy quickly learned to take what pleasure they could wherever they stopped, for most missions were long, and acts of carnal pleasure were generally not allowed in the Cragon ships, considering they were on a religious crusade to retake the galaxy. Besides, few, if any, women made it into the Cragon military, so even if they were allowed, the soldiers would be hard pressed to find any worldly pleasures onboard. On top of that, given the veritable tidal wave of men that flowed off Cragon's Pride as soon as they docked, security was fairly lax. To most peoples thinking, who would be foolish enough to try and get on a Cragon battle cruiser, with all the rumors of horrors within?

"It's right what they say, though," Han commented. "We're probably the only people stupid enough to want to get on that thing."

"You know, it's been my observation that the terms stupid and heroic are generally synonymous with one another. The only difference is, if you fail, you're stupid, if you succeed you're heroic," Cyan commented.

Jaina swallowed as she took in the ships formidable defenses, "I have a feeling this is going to be seen as just plain stupid."

"Tut tut, Jaina, if you go in with thoughts of failure, then that is what you will do. Pretend it's already heroic and things will work out if they're meant to," Luke admonished gently. "Alright, Han, see if you can get directions to wherever they're keeping Corran, Ben and Yeswa."

The sat crouched behind some containers, in the cargo hold of Cragon's Pride. They had positioned themselves so that there was always something between them and the more frequently traveled areas of the cargo hold, and then subtly disabled the security holocams covering their position. They had access to a port leading into

the air vents where they had come in, and could quickly leave for any other part of the ship. "They were right next to a relatively unused access terminal."

Han pulled out the data pad Yeswa had given them and started fiddling with the keys. "I wish we'd thought to bring Artoo with us. He'd do this better than I ever could."

"I don't think he's even compatible with the Cragon circuitry," Jaina commented. "I can't even find an access port."

"She's right," Cyan said. "Where would the Cragon get astromech units anyway?"

"Shhh!" Luke suddenly hushed them. "Soldiers coming this way," he mouthed.

Han unplugged from the terminal and switched off the monitor so anyone passing by would think it was off. He joined everyone as they slid into a niche close to the back wall where no one would be likely to look for them. The soldier stopped by the terminal and started inspecting some crates. Luke tensed. If the soldiers accessed the terminal they would see all the work Han had been doing and sound the alarm. They couldn't let them do that. Then after a brief argument, the soldiers lifted a crate and carried it back in the direction they had come. Breathing a sigh of relief, everyone crept out of their hiding place and Han went back to work.

"Uh oh," Han said after a time, his face falling. "Oh, no."

"What?" Luke asked, creeping up beside him to view the screen. "Oh . . ."

"Well, what is it?" Jaina demanded.

Luke shook his head. "Yeswa's been executed."

"That was quick," Cyan said, subdued.

Han snorted. "It says in his file that there's been a warrant for his arrest for twenty five thousand, six hundred and eighty two years. He was already convicted of high treason, and sentenced to death, but he escaped. And given the unique characteristic of his species to retain the thoughts and memories of all their ancestors, the warrant could never expire until his entire line was exterminated."

"Great stars!" Jaina exclaimed softly. "The Cragon hold onto a grudge like a Kyrate Dragon on his first meal after coming out of hibernation."

"Yes, I've felt their lust for revenge," Luke muttered. "Let's just hope they haven't been taking it out on Corran and Ben. What does it say about them?"

"I don't know, there's a lot of security around their files," Han said, tapping away. Then he stopped and frowned at the screen. "Huh?"

Jaina, upon seeing the perplexed and worried expression on her father's face, leaned closer and read the contents on the screen out loud. "Corran Horn, classification Jedi Knight, captured two days ago on Kellonia. The surgery was a success, though the subject did suffer some permanent damage to his optical nerves in the process. The tissue was removed and is now safely stored, waiting to be implanted in the chosen host. The subject is under close observation in room 276-b23, section Norosa. The other subject, Benjamin Skywalker, is placed with him to study their interaction. So far, the subject has comforted Skywalker and described his family to him, along with professing his loyalty and protection for the child, even given his relatively helpless state. This was the expected reaction as it was seen in Skywalker's parents. We will continue to keep them under close observation, and any remarkable behavior will be noted in this log. Doctor Fremi, logging out." Jaina turned to those around her. "What does this mean?"

"A lot of things, Kid," Han said, patting his daughter on the back as he traded glances with Luke and Cyan. "An' none of them good."

"Well, siting here worrying about it won't do any good. Han, see if you can figure out how to get from here to there through the air ducts. Then I'll go first. If we get fired on from the front, I'll be able to shield the rest of you, and that thing's to narrow for me to turn around in, so putting me in the back's useless," Cyan said, pulling the grate off the wall.

Han figured out their rout and then climbed in the duct after Cyan, followed by Jaina, and then Luke came last. Though it was hard going in the narrow passageways, the trip was fairly easy at first, except when they would pass over grating. If any soldier were to look up, they would be as obvious as the sun and just as easy to aim at. They also made an abominable amount of noise when they crossed the grates; Cyan's claws clicked, Jaina's boots clunked, Luke's lightsaber clanked, and Han's blaster rattled. Their progress across them was slow and tense, each waiting for that one officer to look up, just for a second . . . But it never happened, and so they went on, their success only increasing their feelings of uneasiness.

"This is going too well," Han whispered after they had crossed their eleventh grate. "We're gonna get caught, big time."

"We won't get caught. The Force is with us," Jaina said optimistically.

Luke smiled ruefully. "If only things were that simple in the real world. We're the good guys so we win by default."

"But the thing is, no one thinks they're the bad guys," Cyan said from up front, squeezing his great girth along. "As far as the Cragon are concerned, the Universe is theirs by birthright and we just took away their property."

"Much as I hate to interrupt this philosophical discussion, we have to make a right here and then there's another grate to cross, so we should start keeping it down," Han said.

They made it over the grate without incident, and were just about to

turn a corner.Â  Cyan started to go first, but suddenly backed up so quickly Luke was pushed back onto the grate.

"What the hell are you doing?" Han mouthed.

"There's a holo cam covering that section," Cyan mouthed back. Â   
"We'll be seen for sure."

Han and Jaina's eyes widened in surprise while Luke looked apprehensively down at those passing underneath him.Â  Hurry up and get me off this thing, we're going to get caught anyway, he told his dragon.

Cyan shrugged at his padmiri helplessly.Â  What do you want me to do?

"Wait," Han mouthed, fumbling with a panel on the wall beside him. Â   
"I might be able to turn it off here." Â  Luke took his eyes off the stream of traffic below him for a moment to watch his brother, and suddenly wished he hadn't.

"Hey!"

Luke looked down again and saw a soldier looking up at him with an amazed expression on his face.

"Um, we're doing maintenance," Luke said futilely.

The soldier snorted, pulling his blaster as many around him followed suit, "Yeah, right, human.Â  And I'm the Queen of Hapes.Â  Call security!"

"Sith spawn!" Luke cried, shoving Jaina forward to get out of the flurry of blaster bolts that were abruptly sent his way. Â  Jaina stumbled forward and ran into Han, who in turn ran into Cyan. Â  The dragon tried to keep them from entering into the line of sight of the holo cam, until it occurred to him that that was the least of their worries.Â  They scurried forward as fast as they could, the hull plates heating up under their hands as officers fired at them from underneath.Â  They could hear the grating they had just crossed being lifted up as officers tried to pursue them since their blasters seem to be able to go through the air ducts.Â  They reached a junction and paused while Han tried to figure out which direction they should go when there was a sudden creaking noise slightly above them.

"Oh, no!" Jaina exclaimed.Â  "There's too many people in the ducts, their gonna collaâ€œ"

She was interrupted by a shriek of metal separating from metal, and then they were falling.

Corran woke with a start, his body drenched with sweat. Â  The dream was only a dim memory, yet still powerful. Â  He was fighting, fighting as hard as he could, but he couldn't see, he couldn't call on the Force to protect him. Â  His friends were dying all around him and there was nothing he could do.Â  And then he was struck, a mortal blow that he could not defend against because he never saw it coming  
. . .

Corran wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand,

pushing the images from his mind.Â He leaned forward, pressing his eyes against his knees until he should have seen stars. Â When he saw nothing, his frustration increased.

"No!" he almost whimpered, "I will not let myself go out like this!"

"Corran?" a soft voice asked.

"It's ok, Ben," Corran reassured the boy, covering the small hand on his arm with his own, wishing there was someone there to reassure him. Â "I'm . . . I'm all right.Â It was just a dream.Â I'm all right now."

He could almost see the boy lift an eyebrow just like his mother did when she knew someone was keeping something from her. Â "No, you not.Â But that not what I wanted talk 'bout."Â Though his tone was even, there was something in Ben's voice that brought Corran's attention away from his own problems.

"What is it, Ben?" Corran asked, trying to keep his voice as calm as the boy's was.

"Da said he'd come after me," Ben said, and Corran caught the hint of excitement in his words.Â "An' now, he's on his way."

Cyan was the first to crawl out of the fallen air ducts. Â To a casual observer, the scene would appear quite comical. Â Cyan had torn a hole out of the plating above him and slowly peeked out.Â All anyone would be able to see of him was his head and part of his neck, plus a rather bewildered expression on his face as he tried to assimilate what had just happened. Â He was covered in dust and insulation, and with several new tears in his scales, looked more like a Raggedy Andy doll than ever. Â Â He tried to push the rest of his body out and realized the hole was too small.

"Damn it," Cyan muttered, backing up and ripping more metal away with his powerful forarms.Â He tried again but the hole was still too small.Â "Damn it."Â He went through the same process twice more before he could make it out. Â "Damn it . . . Damn it . . . Ah-ha!"

Squeezing out of the pipe, he surveyed the damage. Â The air duct had come down all along the corridor as far as Cyan could see until it disappeared around the bend. Â Those officers that were underneath were either dead or unconscious, so for the moment, Cyan was alone.Â But the dragon knew that wouldn't last for long.

Suddenly a groan came from in the air duct. Â "Jaina?" Cyan called, poking his head back in.

"Oh, my head . . ." Jaina moaned, lifting her head up only enough to clutch it in her hands and curse.

Cyan grinned.Â "Is everything in working order?Â Besides your head that is. Â Do you think you can get up?"

"Ah . . . I think so, I guess . . . Oh, I'm never going anywhere with you people again," Jaina growled, pushing herself up into a crouch



and taking stock of the situation. "Oh, wait, Dad's still unconscious and he's in the way."

"Your uncle is out too. Kick him for me, will you?" Cyan said briskly, ducking in closer.

"I'm not going to kick him!"

Cyan sighed in irritation. "Whatever, just get him up, we haven't much time." He regarded Han for a moment, gauging just how unconscious he was, and then Cyan dragged his tongue up Han's face, leaving a thick trail of saliva.

Han jerked back and started to sputter. "What the hell!"

"Rise and shine, morning glory!" Cyan said cheerfully.

"Agh!" Han exclaimed, wiping his face on his vest. Then they heard Luke groaning and cursing from further down the pipe. "What happened?" Han asked groggily.

"The air duct fell down," Cyan explained, grinning. "I thought it was fairly obvious."

"Shut up, Cyan."

"No. Now, hurry up, old man, the corridor's empty for now, but I don't think that'll last for long."

"'Old man'!" Han cried, making a grab for Cyan as the dragon, grinning mischievously, scampered out of the way. Han scrambled out of the air duct and picked up a piece of insulation and chucked it at Cyan while the dragon laughed and evaded him. Jaina and Luke followed Han out, but as soon as Jaina tried to stand, she felt the floor tip and she almost fell.

"Whoa! Hold on you guys, I think Jaina's got a concussion or something," Luke said

"What?" Han asked, spinning around on his heel and immediately coming to his daughter's aid. "Are you ok, sweetheart?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine, just give me a minute," Jaina said, waving away their ministrations.

Cyan grunted. "Uh, huh, I've heard that from a Skywalker before. C'mon," Cyan pulled her to her feet and before she could fall over again, ducked between her legs and in a moment she was in the saddle, strapped in. "Your mother'd flail my hide from my backside if anything happened to you."

"Alright, you guys, what do we do now?" Luke asked, his weary expression accented by the cut bleeding on his temple.

"Um . . ." Han muttered, patting his pockets, trying to find the data pad. Compressing his lips in annoyance, he reached into the air duct and rummaged around until he found it. "We have to keep going up this way."

"It certainly is taking them a long time to come after us," Jaina

muttered at they wondered through the ruined hallways. Â Dust and insulation would occasionally fall from the ceiling creating a haze of dust and the quiet, muted sound of the alarm gave the whole scene a surreal feel.

Luke shivered, a cold feeling of trepidation coming over him. Â "Hmmm, it didn't take them nearly this long to come after us on the Threnody ."

They rounded a corner just in time to see two medics trying to lift the air duct off a struggling officer.Â They were surrounded by other officers, trying desperately to help, and Luke realized the damage must be even more widespread than they had first realized. Â As soon as the Cragon spotted the bedraggled group they all froze, staring at them in shock.

"Um . . . we're doing maintenance," Luke said lamely again.

"You know," Han mused, "seeing as that failed miserably the first time, I don't see how it's going to work now."

Luke shrugged.Â "Well, I don't know. Â This place looks like it could use some maintenance. Â In fact, if it had gotten proper maintenance before this whole mess happened, the air duct wouldn't have fallen offâ€" "

"Umâ€"guys!" Jaina exclaimed as some off the officers regained their wits and started drawing their blasters.

"Yeah, now would be a good time to run!" Cyan exclaimed, shoving the two brothers down a side corridor.Â "Han, figure out how to get to section Nora or whatever they called it from here."

"Norosa.Â And we go down hereâ€"or not!" Han added when he turned down the hallway he had indicated and almost ran into a flurry of blaster bolts that almost added a few extra orifices. Â "Wait, we can go through these rooms," Han said suddenly, running to a door just behind them and quickly punching in a code from the data pad. Â They ran in and then stopped in their tracks, realizing too late the room was occupied.

"Harsa!" Luke exclaimed.

Harsa grinned and sat back on the cot he was resting on. Â "So you're the ones who've been making all the racket. Â Figures.Â You're son's in the next room over with your friend."

"Get back from the door, Ben!" Corran called when he heard the all too familiar sound of lightsaber cutting metal.Â He heard Ben's foot steps as he ran back and a small hand grasped his. Â Ben gasped in wonder and Corran found himself smiling. Â Undoubtedly the boy's first demonstration of a lightsaber's power would be a good one.

There was a massive metallic clang followed by Cyan's cheerful voice, "Room service!"

"I'll take the eggs Benedict," Corran said, his voice shaky with relief. Â He got unsteadily to his feet, grasping the blanket around him. Â "Not to mention a change of clothes."

A strong arm surrounded his shoulders, steering him forward. "Sorry, we're out of all of the above," Han's voice came from right beside Corran's ear. "But we do have free passage out."

"I'll take that."

"Da!" Ben's voice cried out, followed by the sound of Luke laughing and the rustle of cloth as the two embraced. Corran smiled again but jumped when he felt another hand on his arm.

"Don't worry, it's me, Jaina. Let's make a deal, you hold me up, and I'll steer," Jaina said, putting her arm around him.

Corran frowned. "What happened?"

"I hit my head," Jaina explained. "I'm still a little dizzy."

"A dizzy person guiding a blind man, that makes sense. Why don't we just jump on Cyan?" Corran asked.

Cyan purred and Corran could imagine the eager grin on his face. "Because I'm on plow duty, and trust me, you don't want to be on me when it happens."

It would be a sight that Corran would lament to the end of his days that he was not able to see. A full squadron of Cragon soldiers rounded the corner to see Cyan crouched in the corridor. Cyan opened his maw as far as it could go and screamed long and hard, unfurling his wings and lashing his tail about, single-handedly managing to fill an entire section of the corridor from ceiling to floor. The Chiss stopped in their tracks, each remembering the terrified ramblings of their fellow officers of this monstrosity's prowess. Cyan crouched once again, and then bolted, shrieking, down the corridor. A few of the soldiers had presence of mind to actually fire on him, but upon seeing that their bolts had no effect, smartly turned tail and ran. Cyan rammed into the bulkhead at the end of the corridor, inches away from crushing a Cragon between his thick skull and the wall. Shaking his head to clear his vision he looked at the soldiers. They had paused, waiting to see if he had managed to knock himself out. Cyan didn't bother with a large scream this time, he slightly parted his lips and growled, walking forward slowly, sending the soldiers scurrying away as fast as their legs would carry them.

Cyan laughed maniacally as he walked leisurely after them.

"He's having way to much fun," Luke proclaimed, picking up Ben and jogging after his dragon.

"At least he didn't just eat them," Corran said, wrapping the blanket around him with one arm, holding Jaina up with the other. "Are you sure you don't have any extra clothes?"

Luke smiled apologetically. "Sorry, we traveled light."

"Didn't think to pack any eggs Benedict either, we'll remember that for the next time we have to save your ass," Han added, reaching the corner and waiting a moment before peeking around. The way was clear. They rounded the corner and started jogging again, trying to

find Cyan who they could hear gleefully shrieking somewhere ahead of them.Â They carried on like this until they reached the main hanger, the only place where personal could enter and exit the ship. Â Unsurprisingly, it had been sealed.

"So, how do we get off?" Harsa asked, looking around. Â Then he froze.Â "Luke!"

"What?" Luke asked, only half-listening while his mind mulled over their problem.

"Look behind us."

Having heard those words many times in his life to many an unpleasant outcome, Luke turned around quickly, drawing his lightsaber. Â Arrayed behind them were at least four squadrons of armed soldiers, with the man Luke remembered from their fight on Kellonia in the front.

"Well, I see you got the arm all fixed up," Luke said, trying to be cheerful. Â "Good for you."

As soon as the last word left his mouth, everyone in their small party jumped to each side, Luke, Ben, and Harsa jumping behind some crates, Cyan, Han, Corran, and Jaina behind a small speeder. Â The soldiers started firing immediately, gouging small holes in the crates and scoring the sides of the speeder.

"So how do you think we're doing?" Han called across the small space between them.

"Same as always," Luke responded with a grin.

Han shook his head.Â "It ain't that bad yet."

Suddenly the volley of blaster bolts stopped. Â Trading glances, the party slowly poked their heads from their hiding places.Â The Cragon had all but disappeared. Â Even as they watched, the last of the soldiers disappeared up a turbolift.

"Ok, now I'm scared," Han said.

Jaina glared at him.Â "We went through all that shit, and you're scared when they leave us alone?"

"When the enemy just leaves like that when they've got us outnumbered, four to one, it means they have something planned that's so nasty they don't need anyone else there."Â Then Han turned to her and wagged a finger warningly.Â "And stop using such language.Â This is a survival mission on a star ship, not a drinking contest in a cantina."

Jaina threw her arms up in frustrated astonishment. Â "For the love ofâ€" "

"Da!Â Da, the doors!" Ben exclaimed, oblivious to the conversations around him he was pointing back at the main cargo bay doors.

Luke was about to ask what he meant when suddenly a siren went off and the doors began to open.Â The magcon field was still activated,

but it would undoubtedly be turned off once the doors were lifted, expelling them all into space. Â Then, before anyone could stop him, Ben tore off across the hanger, towards a small hatchway.

"Ben!" Luke called, running after him.Â Ben was completely out in the open by now, and a single blaster bolt could take him out.Â But no one fired, no one bothered.Â Ben raced past a line of shuttles, each attached to a repowering station along the wall. Â He got to a terminal, taped a few buttons, and suddenly one detached and came online.

"Go in there!" Ben shouted above the humming of the repulsor coils. Â He continued on, reached the small hatchway, and pulled the door open with all his strength.Â He ran in, ignoring his father's shouts and crawled inside. Â Luke tried to follow him but the space was too small.

"Damn it!" Luke cried.Â "Ben get back here!Â What are you doing?" Â He motioned to the others who were just reaching the shuttle. Â "Get inside, I'll get Ben!"

Everyone else started boarding, but Cyan loped over. Â "You get in the ship, Luke.Â If they drop the magcon field while you're still out here, you'll get sucked out.Â Ben can survive for a while in there, and I can hold on longer than you, besides, I can function in vacuum. Â That whole exploding part might slow you down some."

"Why do you have to be right?" Luke demanded, knowing he should go though he still wasn't budging.

"Because I'm special," Cyan said, giving his padmiri a shove.Â "Now get in that ship. Â I'll be along."Â Luke bit his lip, glanced at the hatchway, and then ran, knowing Cyan would do all that he could.

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"Mara, are you sure we should be doing this?" Deacon asked as she steered the Rancor's Bane out of Kellonia's atmosphere.Â "Luke said to stay put."

Mara just smiled.Â "There's something you should know about Luke.Â He spends a good chunk of his time worrying about everyone else in the universe but himself.Â As such, he makes a lot of dumb decisions that most people with a healthy dose of self-preservation wouldn't do if you paid them a million credits. Â And as is wife, it's my job to make sure none of those decisions get him killed.Â That, my dear Deacon, is hard to do when you're not with him."Â Mara's grin widened.Â "I'm not going into a danger zone any less able than I have before."

"What's the last part got to do with it?" Deacon asked.

"Um, part of a private conversation we had before he left," Mara said obliquely. Â "Better buckle up, we're coming up on Cragon's Pride and I have this sneaky suspicion it's going to be a bumpy ride."

Suddenly the com. unit started to beep.Â "What's this?" Deacon commented upon seeing the readout. Â "It's a message from Cragon's

Pride , but it's only in text, and it ain't coming through regular systems."

"Huh?"Â Mara brought the message up on her screen and her eyes widened in amazement. Â "Oh, I am so, so glad I ignored Luke. Â Hold tight, we gotta get to Cragon's Pride 's shuttle bay in a hurry."

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"Ben?Â Come on out, we've gotta get out of here before the magcon field comes down," Cyan said, keeping his voice friendly, even.Â He could hear Ben doing something, but an outcropping of wires and computer components hid him from the dragon's sharp eyes.Â "What are you doing?"

"Sending message to mum," Ben explained.

"What?" Cyan exclaimed.Â Reaching out with the Force he quickly realized Mara was a lot closer to the Cragon's Pride than she should have beenâ€" and she was getting closer by the second. Â "Ben, how did you know how to do that?"

Sparks were suddenly set off near where Ben was, but Cyan sensed no pain or surprise from the child.Â "I let the Force tell me.Â It tells me everything. Â Just like you."

"Sweet mother of dragons!" Cyan exclaimed. Â The child was barely a year old and already he was using the Force better than some of the full-fledged Jedi Knights were. Â But maybe that wasn't so strange. Â Perhaps someone born into the Force would embrace it without inhibitions. Â That must have been why Jedi children were taken at such a young age before the Purge.Â But why hadn't Jacan, Jaina, and Anakin learned this? Cyan mused. Â Ah, because it wasn't constant exposure to the Force. Â Ben's probably been using it almost every minute of his life just to survive.Â All these thoughts flashed through his mind in less than a second before he refocused on getting the child out of the hatch.Â "That's amazing, Ben, but why did you call her?Â We're getting out of here."

Cyan could see Ben now, crawling towards him. Â Ben shook his head at his words. Â "You're going to need her soon.Â And I don't think I'm getting out of here at all."

"Why not?" Cyan asked, realizing Ben had had a vision of the future. Â "Why aren't you coming with us?"

"You see in a second."

Even though Ben said these things, he was crawling along as fast as he could, and Cyan sensed he did not like or want this future he had seen. Â Cyan started ripping out components to get closer to his padmiri's son and to give Ben more room to get up and run out. Â Suddenly a small hatch unnoticed on the side of the crawlspace opened and in a flurry of blue Ben was pulled through it. Â Cyan heard Ben cry out as he was dragged further away. Â Cyan shrieked and tried to shove his massive bulk after them. Â And then the steady alarm that had been sounding went off, and the magcon field with it.

Instantly the air from the cargo bay was sucked out into the vacuum

of space. ^ The pull was so great that Cyan was sucked out the crawl space before he knew what was happening. ^ He tried to dig his talons into the hull plates, but was slowly dragged towards the cold blackness behind him. ^ Arching his neck, a ripple sliding up his scales as he spit some acid on the floor in front of him, gouging a jagged hole. ^ Holding onto that, he just managed to keep from sliding any further. ^ There was nothing else near him to grip to make his way towards the shuttle rising up to go after him. ^ Don't open the hatch! ^ You'll be sucked out too! Cyan told Luke, hearing his padmiri 's intentions. ^ Luke's frustration and stark fear came to Cyan in wave, almost making Cyan lose his grip. ^ He shoved those emotions to the back of his mind, bending his thoughts instead towards finding a way out of this.

Suddenly Cyan jerked back an inch. ^ Looking down, he saw the edge around his acid-made hole was beginning to crumble as the leftovers dissolved their way outward. ^ A little more crumbled under his talons as he turned frantically around, trying to find something, anything , to grab onto. ^ There was a lift not three metres to the side ^ he might be able to make it. ^ Gathering his haunches underneath him, Cyan pushed off with all his might.

I'm gonna make it! Cyan thought with elation. ^ I'm gonna make ^ no, wait, I'm not. ^ He stretched out as far as his sinewy body would allow, but it just wasn't enough. ^ He missed the edge by mere centimetres. ^ His body slammed into the deck and he was dragged inexorably towards the black opening behind him. ^ Flailing his arms and legs in all directions in a vain attempt to find some perches, all he managed to do was start himself spinning as the force of the escaping atmosphere pulled him upward.

He was thrust out of the cargo bay less than a second latter, spinning head over tail, head over tail. ^ His view changed from the light blue of Cragon's Pride fading into the blackness of space, fading into light blue again. ^ He was rotating so fast Cyan was sure he would be sick. ^ He could feel the bubble of air around him but that would be gone sooner than anyone could come out and get him. ^ He could survive for a short time in vacuum; but would it be enough?

Suddenly a brownish gray spec showed up against the black star-studded vista that almost completely surrounded him. ^ It got bigger and bigger but Cyan was turning so fast he couldn't figure out what it was. ^ Soon it was all he could see in that direction and suddenly it was all around him. ^ He slammed into a very hard surface and thudded to the floor.

Thudded to the floor! ^ I'm in ship! ^ Cyan looked around but he was still so dizzy the world kept turning even though he wasn't anymore. ^ Cyan managed to get up, though he dared not walk until the ground stopped its offensive shifting. ^ There was a clatter and suddenly a familiar face was in front of him. ^ "Oh!" he said. ^ "That makes sense." ^ And then promptly fell over.

"CYAN!"

Han ran after Luke and caught him just as Luke seemed ready to jump out the hatch after the dragon. ^ "Luke, stop! ^ You can't help him that way. ^ C'mon, help me pilot this thing out of here!"

Luke stared at the hatch for long moments, then snarled something under his breath and jogged back to the cockpit.Â  Han paused for a crucial second, lines of worry etching his face.Â  "What if Cyan died here?Â  What would happen to Luke then?"

Luke was already in the pilot's seat when Han reached the cockpit.Â  Han opened his mouth to complain but Luke shot him such a look of barely contained panic and frustration that Han clapped his mouth shut again.Â  Han jumped into the copilot's chair and started pulling up technical data.Â  The Cragon must not have been prepared for this contingency; they hadn't even scrambled any fighters yet.Â  Luke lifted them off the deck with the speed only a former snub fighter pilot could manage.Â  They were blasting for the cargo bay doors when Luke suddenly jumped and swayed in his seat a little.

"You ok, kid?" Han asked, grabbing Luke's arm to steady him.

"Yeah," Luke said, a relieved smile coming across his face even though he still looked a little off balance.Â  "Look who caught Cyan."

Han turned back to the view port and grinned.Â  "I always maintained that your wife has impeccable timing."

"Hello Rancor's Bane , nice of you to stop by," Luke commented though he didn't sound as pleased as he should have.

"No problem!" it was Deacon who responded first, his voice sounding light, almost merry.Â  "We just thought we'd pick up some space trash while we waited for you guys to drag your asses out of there."

"Space trash!Â  Give me five minutes, you little swoopie doopie, and I'll show you what space trash really looks like."

"What, you mean whatever that was that you puked up all over the cargo bay floor?"

"Quiet you."

"Hi, Cyan, how ya doing?" Han asked, trading amused glances with Luke.

"I think I want to throw up again."

Han threw Luke a questioning look but the Jedi just grinned back at him.Â  "The ride over made him a little dizzy.Â  Is Mara there?"

"Yeah," answered Mara's voice as the Rancor's Bane and the Cragon shuttle met up and headed for the surface of Kellonia as fast as their sublight engines would take them.Â  "How's Ben?"

Luke was silent for a long time before answering.Â  "We couldn't get him off.Â  We almost did, but . . ." his voice trailed off gradually.Â  He could sense Mara's helpless frustration and sighed.Â  "I don't think we're getting back on that ship."

"I figured that," Mara's voice came back very quietly, betraying none



of her inner feelings. "How's Corran, then?"

"Good and bad. He wasn't interrogated or anything. The only thing we can find wrong with him is he's, ah, blind," Han explained.

There was stunned silence from across the com channel. "He's blind?" Hutt spit, Han, don't sound so nonchalant about it," Deacon exclaimed.

"I don't think it's permanent. It's probably just a result of the sedative they were giving him," Han said defensively.

Luke frowned. "You know, we never did get a chance to ask him how it happened."

"You see, this is why I'm supposed to come along," Mara said in exasperation.

"Han, take the stick," Luke said, leaning back.

"Not a problem," Han said eagerly.

Luke closed his eyes, stretching out to ask Corran how he was doing, and discovered to his surprise that Corran wasn't there! No, wait, that wasn't it. He could feel his presence, but his strength in the Force was missing somehow. "I'll be back in a second. I'm going to go find out what's wrong with him while we have a minute. Call me if you see something coming."

"Alright," Han said as Luke jumped agilely out of his seat and ran back to the small passenger area behind the cockpit. Luke opened the small hatch and looked into the room. Corran was huddled into a chair with the flimsy blanket wrapped tightly around him while Harsa and Jaina searched through some compartments in the back wall for some clothes for him.

Luke tilted his head at Corran for a moment, his frown accented by worry lines around his eyes and mouth. Corran was doing his best to keep his face blank, so it was only through long association that Luke knew something was bothering him. As he came closer, Luke's worries became even more founded; Corran was afraid.

Of what, Luke didn't know, but he had a good idea. "Corran?"

"Huh?" Corran jumped when he heard Luke's voice, then relaxed almost immediately. "Oh, Luke, um, what is it?"

"What happened, Corran?" Luke asked simply.

Corran stared at him for a moment with his sightless gaze. He could tell even by the tone of his Master's voice that he knew. "Remember how I told you about the part in Yeema's story where the Cragon stole the Force from people? Well, they've figured out how to do that one again," he explained, the sardonic tone of his voice twisting unwillingly to bitterness. Even without being able to see or sense him, Corran could feel Luke's shock and fear.

"But how?" Luke asked, his voice soft with wonder as he sat down next

to his shivering friend.

Corran tried to answer when suddenly he and Luke were almost knocked out of their seats by an explosion that rocked the shuttle down to its foundations. Â Luke was on his feet in a flash, racing back to the cockpit.

"Luke!Â Get back in here, now!" Han's voice shouted over the intercom.Â "We've got company, and lots of it!"

> <p class="MsoBodyTextIndent2"> Chapter XII<p>

"Sithspawn!" Luke cried as he ran back to the cockpit. Â He jumped back into the pilot's seat just in time to see the Rancor's Bane sideslip to avoid a verdant laser bolt shot from behind. Â Luke glanced at the tactical display that showed a full squadron. Â "Took them long enough."

Han snorted.Â "What, you're complaining?"

"No, I'm just saying, they don't make escape attempts as hard as they did in the good old days," Luke said with a touch of sarcastic nostalgia. Â "Damn, we're hitting the stratosphere. Â Say, Han, old buddy, how do you think this thing handles in atmospheric conditions?"

"I think we're about to find out," Han growled, switching on the targeting computer and punching in data.Â "This thing has Hutt spit for shields, Luke, we gotta get some cover."

Luke nodded, scanning the topographic data. Â "There's a mountain range in the Sou'Eastern Hemisphere. Â I think it can give us some protection."

"Better than nothin'," Han muttered, sending a spattering of return fire against the lead ship's shields to no effect. Â Luke shed altitude as quickly as he could without raising the hull temperature to critical; the speed of his decent caused their pursuers to think they'd already caused damage. Â They weren't the only ones who thought the shuttle was in trouble.

"Luke!Â Are you guys alright over there?" Mara called over the com.

"We're fine, Mara.Â Check your topographical data, we're heading for area K-7 in South East," Luke told her as he fought with the stick.Â The ship bucked and skidded when it hit a crosswind.Â "This thing handles like a bloody TIE."

"Yeah, well, deal with it," Han said as he sent a volley of bolts into the leading Cragon craft's dorsal fin.Â He held the trigger down, tracking the ship as it juked to try and throw off his lock until he punched through the shields. Â The verdant fire sliced through the dorsal fin, then Han tracked down and cut great chunks into the fuselage until something inside the fighter exploded.Â The front end disintegrated as the rear of the fighter continued on through the expanding cloud to tumble impotently to the surface.Â One of the following ships, obviously unprepared for its wing mate to be destroyed this early in the fight, flew right through. Â A large

piece of shrapnel hit the cockpit, splitting the view port in two, killing the pilot inside.Â The ship veered sharply to the left, almost colliding with the pilot next to him.Â This one was not caught unprepared, and pulled an impossibly sharp maneuver to avoid his wingman.

Jaina had come to the cockpit just in time to watch the spectacular explosions behind them.Â "Only ten left."

"Nice shot, Han," Luke said as he reached the mountain range and dove in with the Rancor's Bane right behind them.

Han grinned.Â "At least this thing has good targeting computers."

"They'd have to.Â If this is the best pilots they've got, then my respect for the Cragon's intelligence has dropped dramatically," Deacon said over the com.Â "Beating them might not be that hard after all."

"Such uneven odds for those poor pilots," Cyan crooned. Â "Maybe we should cut them some slack."

"These aren't the best pilots in the Cragon fleet," Harsa said from the hatch, watching the display.Â "I don't think they're supposed to even stop us."

"What are you talking about?" Mara demanded over the com. Â "Those lasers they're firing at us seem real enough."

Harsa gestured to the screen.Â "Look how long it took them to go after us.Â And their flying.Â These boys are right out of the academy, if I'm any judge. Â They're treating this like a training excise."

"He's got a point," Luke said as he navigated into a narrow canyon. Â "Except for that third.Â I think he's there to make sure everything goes just as they want. Â Hold on!"Â Luke dialed back the speed so fast everyone in the shuttle was thrown forward. Â Then, before the ship could come to a complete stop, he was pumping the rudder until they were pointed at a side path and then blasting forward just in time to avoid a proton torpedo that would have taken off their left thruster.Â Mara had just enough time to anticipate his move to keep from blasting completely by them, but the depleted squadron of fighters blew by.Â The third, now in the lead, managed to compensate and was on their tail again in less than two seconds.Â The rest of the squadron scrambled desperately to follow, one cutting the turn off so close he slammed his left wing against the rocky wall until it was nothing but a mutilated piece of scrap.Â He spun briefly out of control, then smashed into the opposite side.

"Thanks, Luke!Â I think you've managed to permanently lodge my spleen in my throat," Corran called from the adjacent room.Â "I appreciate that!"

"No problem!Â Hey, you want me to do it again?" Luke called back as they swooped under a natural bridge that stretched across the canyon, made by a river long ago.

"Not really."

"Too bad," Luke muttered as he cut the thrust again. But instead of swerving down another side canyon, he pointed the nose down and headed straight towards the ground!

"Ah, Luke?" Han asked nervously. "What are you doing?"

"Trust me," Luke said obliquely, not slowing or altering their decent. The Rancor's Bane followed them slowly, with the perusing fighters following slower still. "Close up on me, Mara."

Mara glanced at the altitude counter, and licked her dry lips. "Um, Luke, you do realize the grounds getting kinda close . . ."

"Stay on me."

"Alright," Mara said then added under her breath, "I sure hope you know what you're doing."

The group of ships kept dropping and dropping with absolutely no sign of stopping. The third in the Cragon Squadron was just about to call his ships off when he realized Luke's plan. Luke waited, hand ready on the stick, fighting every instinct in his body to pull up. He waited, and waited, and then when he could make out the leaves on the trees below him, he pulled the stick back until the top was digging into his chest. "Mara, pull up!"

"Finally!" Mara breathed, pulling the Rancor's Bane out of the dive.

And then was forced to twist violently to the side in order to stay on Luke's tail. She couldn't see where they were going; the shuttle was completely blocking her forward view. All she could tell was that instead of heading straight for the ground they were heading straight for the canyon wall with no chance of stopping in time. Then, just as Mara was about to cry out, everything went black.

The third of the squadron, one Dorsea Dubagh, hulled on the stick as hard as he could to stay with the fleeing ships. Dubagh gritted his teeth when he heard an explosion behind him as one more of his incompetent wingmates failed to negotiate the turn. Do not feel remorse for them, Dubagh reminded himself. They die for the glory of the Mother People, and there is no greater honor in life.

They entered into an abandoned tunnel, part of a long forgotten attempt to make a road through the mountains that was abandoned as soon as cheaper, more economical forms of transportation over the mountains were found. It was tricky flying, none dared turn on their running lights for fear of making themselves an easy target in the narrow passage. Luke and Mara were flying completely on instinct, and the Cragon, those who made it through, were relying on sensor data alone.

Suddenly they flashed into a ravine filled with lumpy outcroppings spiking the ground. Dubagh felt a moment of disgust as the Jedi filtered through the stalagmites in a ship they had never flown before with apparent ease, while men who have been training in their fighters for most of their adult lives found their destinies as black

smudges against tanned rock.

After the harrowing trip through the ravine, the pursuing fighters were down to five.Â  Luke was just glancing at the topographical sensors again when Han noticed something that could easily become a slight problem.

"Hey, Luke, did you bother to check how much fuel was in this thing when we took it?" Han asked.

"No . . . do I want to know why?"

Han shrugged.Â  "No, not really.Â  But I think you should anyway.Â  We're just about empty now."

"Shavit, shavit, shavit, damn," Luke growled when he caught sight of the fuel indicator.

"Yeah, because adding 'damn' at the end of that sentence made it worse," Jaina muttered.Â  "What are we going to do?Â  At the rate we're burning fuel we'll be out in a few minutes."

Luke bit his lip, then flipped the com back on.Â  "Mara, do you still have the locator on you?"

"Yeah," came the distracted reply.Â  "But we never got a chance to test it."

Luke gestured for Han to pull out the homing beacon they had taken with them in case they were captured.Â  "Turn it on, Han.Â  Now's as good a time to see if it works as any."

"Am I the only one who thinks this is a bad time to be doing a systems check?" Deacon asked as he activated the locator.

Cyan shrugged from beside him and watched the screen that would show the location of the beacon.Â  "It gives us lowly passengers something to do while the pilots have all the fun.Â  Here, it's coming up now, Luke.Â  Yeah, seems to be accurate."

"Alright," Luke said, thinking rapidly.Â  "Mara, be ready, I'm going to fly this thing into the cliff face."

"You mean you're actually going to tell me which direction you'll be tearing off to this time?"

There was an amused pause.Â  "No, I'm going to actually fly the ship into the cliff face."

Now it was Mara's turn to pause, but not in an amused way.Â  "You wanna explain the sudden urge to switch careers to kamikaze?"

"We're running out of fuel.Â  If we don't bail we're going to crash.Â  We'll create a diversion so you can get the Rancor's Bane out of here.Â  Go into hiding.Â  Cyan can tell you when it's safe to come after us.Â  I'll aim this thing at a mountain.Â  Our buddies back there will probably think I'm pulling another game of chicken with the cliff and follow right behind me.Â  We might even take a few with us.Â  Just before we hit, we bail and hope no one shoots us on the way down.Â  There are lots of places to hide down there, so we

should be all right. "Everyone clear on that?"

"Yeah," Mara said sourly. "Doesn't mean I like it, but yeah."

"Then get ready," Luke said, turning down a canyon that was relatively wider than most. The last thing he wanted was to bail and wind up on a cliff bluff with no cover and no place to run. The shuttle and the Rancor's Bane sideslipped and juked to avoid the verdant blasts from behind them, taking full advantage of the added space. But the Cragon weren't about to let opportunity pass them by either. Their smaller ships flittered about the space like a swarm of Jubak bugs in mating season.

"Harsa, get the escape modules ready," Luke ordered as he started lying in a course that would crash them against the sheer cliff face far ahead of them. "You got that diversion yet, Han?"

"Well, there's a projection up ahead that'll work, but I'm not sure if the explosion will be big enough," Han explained as he calculated trajectory.

"Why not? You said this thing has proton torpedoes; they blow up real pretty in atmosphere."

Han shrugged. "Yeah, but this thing was a whopping complement of two torpedoes."

"It'll have to do," Luke said, hitting the com. "Mara, see that outcropping out ahead? Go towards it. We need you to drop back so you have a few of the fighters behind you so we can justify firing some torpedoes. We'll hit the outcropping but you gotta get out of there quick before the dust clears so they think you've been destroyed."

"Got it."

Mara pulled the Rancor's Bane in a sharp maneuver that took it up and to the side, serving to make them momentarily almost impossible to hit, but also slowing their speed dramatically. It was an amateurish maneuver that was fairly difficult but usually got one in more trouble than it was worth. The result of doing it now managed to place the Rancor's Bane in the middle of three of the fighters, which immediately set about pummeling them with laser blasts.

Mara headed towards the outcropping, quick enough to make it seem like she was trying to get away, but just not quick enough to lose the fighters. Mara knew the shielding on the Rancor's Bane was a lot tougher than that of the Cragon fighters, but she wasn't entirely sure how they would stand up to such a large blast occurring right over them. Well, it was too late now; she would just have to trust that Han wouldn't blow her up.

They reached the outcropping, dipping below it just as the proton torpedoes hit. One struck the fighter to their left between the Rancor's Bane and the cliff, while the other one hit the outcropping right at the base. The view port dimmed automatically to compensate for the sudden flare of explosions around them then lightened to reveal a world of fire and rocks and shrapnel. Mara

pulled up sharply, praying that the outcropping had been completely blown off or they were going to considerably increase the size of the explosion. Â There was a large thud as something big impacted on the port side, then the sensors indicated that they had cleared the cliff so Mara pulled sharply to the left, clearing the explosion as quick as she could least someone see her.

"Anyone pursuing?" Mara asked breathlessly.

"No," Deacon reported, "and we took two fighters out in that explosion." Â Mara relaxed, steering towards a landing pad the map they had downloaded upon entering the system indicated they could find safe storage of their craft and lodging while they waited for their companions to get clear.

Luke was just letting out a relieved sigh of his own after Cyan assured him they were ok.Â "The pods are set, Harsa?"

"Yeah, we can bail anytime," Harsa called from the passenger compartment.

"All right, c'mon Han," Luke said, initiating the intercept course he had programmed and then jumped out of his chair. Â They jogged back as Luke checked his watch. Â "We have exactly 47 seconds to get out of here before we hit, so hurry."

While Jaina helped Corran up, Harsa opened the last hatch on the two escape pods.Â Jaina, Corran, and Han jumped in the first, while Luke and Harsa jumped in the second. Â As soon as the door was sealed, Luke smacked the ejection button and was almost immediately thrown up against the floor when they blasted upwards.Â He caught a glimpse of the shuttle crashing into the cliff face, taking a few fighters with it, and then they were spinning out of control so fast, he thought he might expel his insides all over the pod if he kept looking. Â Strapping into an empty seat, he closed his eyes and hoped they wouldn't get shot.

Dubagh was getting worried.Â They were planning something, he knew.Â The ships had suddenly stopped maneuvering as much, as if the pilots were distracted by something else.Â He knew it was only a matter of time before the shuttle ran out of fuel, and Dubagh had explicit instructions to let them escape. Â Suddenly the alien ship pulled an amazing turn for its size, testament to the pilot's ability.Â But the move only put the ship in the midst of three of his fighters. Â

Dubagh was just contemplating why they would be stupid enough to do this when they flew under an outcropping and the shuttle fired its complement of torpedoes, presumably to assist their sister ship. Â One did successfully take out a fighter, but the other missed completely and hit the outcropping.Â There was an explosion of dust and rock, colored occasionally with flashes of metal and ship components.Â Dubagh thought he saw something explode from the top but he was too far down to see. Â When the dirt cleared the alien ship and two of his fighters were gone.

Cursing under his breath, Dubagh tried to think of how he would get out of this.Â His commanders had made it very clear that everyone was to escape, to spread the terror of what the Cragon could do to the New Republic's vaunted defenders of peace and justice. Â But at

this rate they were going to get themselves all killed.

Then he saw the shuttle shift its evasion tactics. Instead of each turn coming from a different direction, it sideslipped back and forth with an occasional random maneuver thrown in. Hit after hit was scored on the shuttle's aft shields. Dubagh followed closely, suspecting that they were going to pull another sharp turn against the wall. They were getting disturbingly close to the cliff face, but Dubagh was undeterred. This pilot was an experienced one, and undoubtedly had something planned. Dubagh had just realized that the shuttle's movements were automated when it struck the mountain.

The resulting explosion mushroomed out in a spectacular display of smoke, durasteel, glass and fire. Dubagh tried desperately to turn, but there was no room. He flew right into the explosion, the metal of his ship superheating in the intense fire and ignited the fuel in its tanks before it could even hit the cliff. Another one of the fighters was caught in the fire. It managed to turn but one of its engines burst into flames and the hapless pilot lost control and smashed into the opposing cliff face.

The remaining shuttles swerved away and limped back to Cragon's Pride, unaware that their true mission had actually been carried out.

> <p class="MsoBodyTextIndent2"> Chapter XIII<p>

" . . . and that is why we need to press for military action now. Not restrict it! What was done to Captain Horn and what is being done to my nephew is truly inexcusable, and should not go unanswered," Leia finished her speech, letting her auburn eyes blaze over each separate member of the Council of the New Republic, then turned outward to the Senate. She had called the meeting hours after her brother's return, livid that after filing a report of what had happened, Wedge himself came and told them that there would be no retaliation strike. Why? Because the Council had declared a non-confrontational stance on the matter.

"President Organa Solo, no one is denying the things that happened to your friend and your relative are unfortunate and you have our condolences," newly appointed Councilor Uywqu of the world of Gakwash said patiently.

"Than why are you all acting as if it has no consequences?"

Borsk Fey'lya smoothed the fur around his eyes in agitation. He had just returned from a trip of Bothowi and still hadn't recovered from the jet lag. He had to be awakened to come to this abrupt meeting, and had entered in as foul a mood as he could muster. "President, I hate to be the one to inform you of this, but our military is not there for your own personal vendettas against aliens."

"That's what you think this is about?" Leia demanded, her fury rising. "They deliberately attacked and tortured two Jedi, took their child, then preformed unwanted surgery on an officer in our own fleet—permanently removing him from his post—and you say I'm acting on a personal vendetta? So what if I know the people involved. It still happened! Would you take action if it were



anyone else?" Would you take action if they were related to . . . say, Councilor Blacksky?" Leia gestured to the female Duros sitting calmly in her seat. "She started slightly, then shrugged.

"Who is involved with the victims is not the issue here," Councilor Vywa Blacksky said easily. "You should know that President, and you as well, Councilor Fey'lya. We should be communicating with these people, learning about their culture and incorporating it into ours, not try destroying them."

"I never said we should destroy them!Â But I don't think we should be incorporating their culture into ours, seeing as it is the antitheses of it.Â Their very religion is based on the annihilation of the Jedi over a war fought before the Old Republic was formed!Â You can't get an entire culture to change when they've managed to hold a grudge for over twenty five thousand years!" Leia looked around imploringly, seeing, for the most part, indecision.Â There were only a few that outright disagreed with her, and most of those did only because they took it upon themselves to disagree with everything she said.Â The only one she could see who sincerely disagreed with her was Councilor Vywa Blacksky. Â Leia turned her eyes on her, silently asking if there had been any change in her opinion, and saw nothing in the cold red eyes that stared back.

Admiral Ackbar gestured calmly for Leia to retake her seat. "It is clear that we will solve nothing today. We must reach a consensus before we can go to war, which you know is a very serious thing to undertake. So let us discuss this until we can reach an agreement."

"Discuss?â Yes, we'll discuss this until we're blue in the face, and we'll be exactly where we started. â Meanwhile, they build their strengthâ"

Leia, be calm.

Leia stuttered to a stop and stared at the door. "There stood Luke and Cyan, though no one had heard them enter." Luke gave a little half smile and shrugged as if at the hopelessness of politicians, but Leia realized it was Cyan who had spoken to her.

Luke took a step forward, his boot clicking on the polished floor, suddenly the only sound in the great Senate Chamber, bringing everyone's attention on him. He looked at no one, but his eyes seemed to fall on everyone. Then he shook his head, turned and started to walk out. "The eyes of ambition see not what is truly before them. Today is not the time to argue this." Then he and Cyan quietly left.

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Corran cold feel the cool metal beneath his hands, his fingers tracing the original shape and the many scrapes and pot marks incurred from years of flying through space. He knew every dent, every mark; he could feel the minuscule lines of paint that marked all of his kills over the years, the numerous TIE's, Ugliers, and varied other craft. He ran his hands over the X-Wing from nose to tail and back again. Then he stopped and rested his cheek against the fuselage.

There was a very gentle, very soothing croon from beside him. "He started then immediately relaxed. "It was just Olive, who had taken it upon himself to become Corran's sight." Corran let his fingers brush against the small, spiky ridge that descended from Olive's forehead to the base of his neck.

"You know, you can do other things besides fly."

This time Corran jumped even more violently. "Who's there?" he asked, jerking towards the voice, knowing all too well just how defenseless he was.

"It's Bror Jace, Corran. I didn't mean to startle you."

"Bror? What in the Void are you doing here?" Corran asked, letting his hand drop from the X-Wing and turning his sightless eyes towards the former member of Rogue Squadron.

"I heard what had happened, I came to see for myself and offer my condolences." Bror said, his voice matter of fact as if Corran should have guessed the reason already.

Corran raised an eyebrow in disbelief. "Uh, huh, and so why did you really come here?"

Corran could almost hear him smile. "It was a strange sensation. "I came to offer Master Skywalker the support of Zaltin Corp."

"Well, um, that's great, Bror," Corran said, frowning. "But what does that have to do with me, and how does that change anything? Thyferra's always supplied bacta to the Jedi at cost—which, by the way, we are most grateful for."

"Please, walk with me a minute, Corran," Bror said and suddenly Corran felt an arm touch his. Shrugging, Corran laid his hand on Bror's arm and they walked through the hanger. "Maybe it's just from flying with you, but every time I see something on the Holonet about Jedi I usually stop and listen. I don't actively go after it, but if I see something about Jedi I want to watch and find out. Lately so much has been going on that I've taken more interest, though I'm not the only one. Anyway, I've kind of been keeping tabs on what's been going on for the last while. I also saw the holocaust of that emergency Senate meeting held the other day. I think it is apparent that the Jedi are going to get little to no help from the New Republic. So, since I already know you, Zaltin Corp. decided that they would send me to give Master Skywalker a message."

"And what would that be," Corran asked, trying desperately to figure out what Bror was talking about.

Bror stopped walking and turned Corran to face him, knowing it was a pointless thing to do to a blind person, but he refused to think of this man who had been his top rival through all his months with Rogue Squadron as disabled in any way. They might not have been best friends, but they'd always had each others respect. "Master Skywalker is going to have to take some action. Whether it is government sanctioned or not, he's going to need some support. We

know the importance of his going forward with whatever plan he's come up with to handle the Cragon. Â Zaltin Corp. is prepared to offer him financial assistance and anything else he wants if need be, whatever action he deems necessary to take."

"Uh, ok," Corran said, his brow furrowed. Â "I don't think it's quite that serious yet, but I'll tell him."

"You really don't think it's that serious? I think you need to look a little harder then." Bror said, and once again Corran could almost hear him grin.

"He's right," Luke said later after Corran told him about Bror's talk. Â "It's beginning to look to me like we won't be getting any government assistance.Â And you should know Zaltin Corp. isn't the first company to make this kind of offer. Â Sienar sent us a communique, along with some other companies."

"Seriously?" Mara asked, trading glances with the rest of the group gathered in her and Luke's apartment.

Luke nodded.Â "The weird thing is, a number of them are Imperial, not just Sienar."

"Not that Sienar cares who they sell too," Han said with a shrug. Â "Why would they care who they support?"

"But they're still fairly anti-Jedi in a lot of places in the Empire. Â Why would Sienar and other companies risk losing such a large portion of their client base in this way?" Leia asked.

Luke shook his head, "It isn't the anti-Jedi faction they're trying to please, it those who still honor Grand Admiral Thrawn they're trying to attract. Â Somehow it got out that the Cragon were the threat Thrawn was trying to protect the galaxy from hen he set up the base on Nirauan. Â And it is well know that Thrawn had great respect for Jedi. Â Besides, since we seem to be the only ones trying to 'carry on Thrawn's work', as it is being projected there, then it serves their best interests to support us.Â This whole escapade has seriously helped our image in Imperial Space."

"Not that we're complaining about any of this," Deacon said with a cheerful grin.Â "More money for us."

"If we chose this direction," Luke said, holding up a hand to stop that line of thought.

Cyan shrugged.Â "You never know. Â We might just get the support of the Council."

"Right now, I really don't see that happening unless something major happens," Mara interjected, shaking her head.

"We will wait and see what develops," Luke said firmly. Â "It's too early to make this kind of decision. Â When we know for sure we will receive no support here, then we start looking for other alternatives and we'll have to accept outside sources to move forward."

Corran sat forward, resting his chin on his hands and balancing his elbows on his knees.Â "Or, the argument could be made that the Force

has just supplied a way for us to leave now, so we should probably take it." "No one answered to his comment right away so Corran just shrugged and sat back. "Or I could be completely wrong. I wouldn't know. I can't tell what the Force is about anymore."

"You don't always have to be able to feel the Force to understand it. I've seen plenty of non-Force sensitive people make very astute observations about it," Luke said, throwing Han a grin.

"Whatever," Corran shrugged again. "The decision isn't up to me. Once again the fate of the Universe sits on the shoulders of the Skywalker twins."

"Oh, good," Leia said with a bemused smile and raised eyebrow.

"I think that's the point, actually," Cyan said. When everyone threw him confused looks he shrugged and explained, "The prophecy, and all the events that have been going on lately have circled around you two. And things just keep getting bigger and bigger. I would say you two are in for the ride of your lives over the next couple of months."

Luke groaned but Leia grinned and added, "And guess who happens to be involved with everything you just said."

"Me," Cyan said, nodding, just as bemused as Leia had been before.

"Well, I guess we're all in for the ride of our lives," Leia decided.

Deacon frowned. "As happy as I am to hear this, I was just wondering. What do we do now? Right now all most of us are doing is sitting around waiting. An' I'm not much for waiting."

"I hear ya," Han said, giving Deacon a sympathetic pat on the shoulder.

"Well, I don't know about you two," Luke said, grinning at their impatience, "but I have to head back to Yavin IV. I've been away for far too long, and Kam's been sending a lot of messages asking that I come back."

Cyan managed to look quite stunned at this announcement. "Oops! Forgot about that whole leading the Jedi thing, didn't we?"

Luke shrugged. "I guess you guys can keep an eye out while I'm gone. Contact me if anything develops."

"Oh, I'll be keeping my eyes wide open for ya', Luke," Corran said sarcastically.

"No you won't, you'll have to blink sometime," Cyan said easily, completely unaffected by Corran's black humor. "Besides, you're coming back with us."

"I am?"

"You've got to do something, Corran," Luke said, "and moping around your house isn't an option."

Mara snorted, "Yeah, and I don't think Mirax is going to put up with it for much longer.Â We figured we'd better take you off planet before she put you out of your misery."

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"Luke!Â It's good to see you back!"

"Kam!" Luke said, pulling the white haired middle-aged man into a brief but warm embrace.Â "It's good to see you too.Â Jeez, how long was it this time?"

"You haven't been here since just after you got the runt," Anakin Solo said with an almost impish grin.Â The morning wind had made his unruly hair an unrecognizable heap and he looked just as enthusiastic as usual.

Cyan let lose and outraged squawk.Â "Runt!Â I'll show you runt!" Â He playful bounded over to his padmiri 's nephew and within seconds had him in a headlock. Â Once he had made sure Anakin's hair would never come untangled he sat back on his haunches and watched the greetings with a smug grin.

"So what was so urgent about me getting back, Kam?" Luke asked, quickly stepping to the side as Jaina rushed down the ramp to embrace Jacen. Â "Last I talked to you everything was fine."

"Can we talk alone?" Kam asked.

Luke shrugged.Â "Sure, of course. Â Oh, wait, there's Kyp.Â Just wait a second, I want to say hello."

"Waitâ€"â€" Kam began, but it was too late.Â Kyp strode towards him, along with Wurth Skidder, Ganner Rhysode and Miko Reglia.Â Even as they approached Luke could sense the growing tension.Â Cyan abruptly jumped to his feet and loped to Luke's side and glared at the party moving towards them, suddenly feeling quite protective. Â Kyp met Cyan's gaze without flinching, a sizeable task for most people.

Luke let his eyes fall on all four of the men one at a time, gauging the emotions coming off them.Â He had a strong sense of righteousness from Ganner and Wurth, which he was not surprised him at all.Â From Miko he got a sort of disquieted submission.Â Furthermore from Kyp he got a firm sense of resolve underlined with doubt that what he was about to do wouldn't work, a doubt that was so deep down, Kyp probably wasn't aware of it himself.

"Hello, guys.Â What's going on?" Luke asked evenly, his eyes narrowing ever so slightly as they all tried to keep their faces expressionless even though devoting their energies to such an attempt left their emotions open to mostly everyone else there.

"Master Skywalker," Kyp began, trying very hard to make himself sound official. Â "We have come to request that you resign as the leader of the Jedi."

Luke's only response to that was to raise his eyebrows. Â Mara looked outraged while Jaina, along with Corran and Mirax who had

exited the shuttle just in time to hear Kyp's announcement, just looked stunned. "Are you, now. On what grounds?"

"That you have lost interest in this academy, and that you are no longer psychologically suited for this work," Kyp said carefully.

"And you are?" Luke asked, amazed at the gall these four had managed to rise. In the entire time he had taught Jedi, no one had outright demanded that he step down. Many had questioned his methods along with just about everything else there was about him, as well as derided his decision to start the academy so soon. Yet in all that time no one had come out and said he wasn't interested and dedicated. He might not have the political sense of his sister, but he knew how to project a commanding presence when he wanted to. He straightened his back ever so slightly and narrowed his eyes, getting a light feel of the Force that backed him. Something he had learned after long years of teaching was that his students could innately sense when he was about to draw on the Force and they instantly afforded him their undivided attention and, usually, respect. "And what suddenly spurs you into becoming the vigilante of the Jedi, Kyp? You've never so much as hinted at this before."

"That was before Tatooine, and before the Battle of the Wills. We believe that you may be a threat to the Jedi, whether you acknowledge it or not," Kyp responded in such measured tones Luke knew he had practiced this beforehand. "We have called all the Jedi together in the Grand Audience Chamber so you can announce it yourself."

Mara was almost sputtering in outrage while most everyone else was staring at Kyp with their jaws hanging open. Luke lazily held up a hand to forestall the violent comeback Mara was trying desperately to articulate. "Then we shall go in and speak to them." Luke held Kyp's gaze for a moment longer until he saw the small doubts reach the surface. Giving a small shrug, Luke walked past him to the Great Temple.

Luke entered the Grand Audience Chamber without a word. The silence that accompanied his entrance was palpable. This must have been going on for quite some time; even the youngest apprentices seemed to have some sense of what was going on. He walked up the middle of the great room, his footsteps resounding loudly in the eerie silence. He reached the small platform at the front that had a small podium set in the center. Luke ignored it and stood at the very front of the stage, wanting to be as close to his students as possible.

"I wonder, what do you expect me to say? I wonder even more what do you want me to say. It is obvious that that I am one of the few people who was not aware of the opinion that I should step down." Luke paused as the sound of uncomfortable shifting resounded all the way up to the ceiling. He waited until it stopped and then continued, "I have to wonder why this started now. I have been gone for long periods of time before, longer than this, and yet now you act neglected. So why now?"

"I want to think it is for good reason, but everything I have been seeing leads me to think otherwise. You are just growing into yourselves as Jedi, and I can sense how you want to test your new abilities. And I cannot fault you for it, especially since I have

gone through the same thing. "I want you to explore what you can do, but there can be grave dangers in that. You can move too fast, you can lose the quietness I have tried to teach you. You will scream too loud in the Force, and I fear you will not be able to hear the Darkness coming."

"And who would replace me?" Luke demanded after a pause, a touch of amusement taking away only slightly from the severity of his tone. "Not to sound prideful, but I would really like to know who here thinks they are more knowledgeable in the Force than I?"

No one answered his question so Luke turned his eyes on Kyp and his group, who were looking decidedly less sure of themselves than they had before. "You, Kyp? Do you think so? No? Well, you must, since you are the one who insisted I step down. You, Wurth? I didn't think so." Luke stayed silent for a moment, letting his gaze fall on each and every Jedi there.

Then he stopped. He could feel the Force shifting towards him, whispering, urging him towards something. Everyone there could feel it move around him, and Luke paused to listen. He didn't pull it in; he wanted the Jedi there to know the Force supported him without encouragement on his part. And that's the point, he realized. Corran was right, the Force wanted the Jedi to go out on their own. He closed his eyes and felt his course lay out before him as clear as if it was displayed on a data card. Opening his eyes he viewed his students again and his newly discovered purpose was evident in his posture, expression, and movement. He told them everything that had happened to him, what he knew of the Cragon, the past of the Jedi, the Dragons of K'ti'ma. The students listened with rapt attention as the Force almost hummed, like a Mother encouraging a child to discover something new and wonderful.

"I will set things in order here. Then, I shall return to Coruscant. I will ask for support one last time. If they will not give it, then we will continue on without them," Luke said, his voice vibrant, stirring the Jedi into a cheer, any doubts of his leadership forgotten.

> 

Chapter XIV

It is almost time for the journey to begin. Something must be done. The Son of Suns is not yet prepared.

\*\* He will be ready in time. The moment of independence is fast approaching. When this happens, we will be prepared. I have planned it.\*\*

\*\*

\*\* Not too soon. Blue grows strong, the Joining comes soon. It must be done before we can begin. This cannot be rushed or it will be unstable. That could bring great tragedy.\*\*

\*\*

We must tread carefully. They must remain within my reach, or the Set Moment cannot happen.

\*\* We know this!Â It will be done, I have decreed it!Â Restrain your impatience, it has removed more from your reach than I ever have. Â The journey will begin when the Joining occurs, which is out of my realm.Â Tell us, is it not yet done?\*\*

\*\*

\*\* It will be done now.\*\*

\*\*

Luke awoke with a funny feeling in his stomach. Â He had dreamt of beautiful voices singing words he couldn't understand. Â Yet something he couldn't quite fathom drew him out of the dream as one is drawn from a warm bath.Â He felt overwhelmingly languid, yet a strange urgency drove him from his bed.Â Not wanting to wake Mara, he managed to rise.Â Looking out his window, he saw that great Yavin had just begun to fill the moon's sky. Â It was only one o'clock in the morning. Â Dragging himself out of the bed, he felt his knees buckle. Â He grabbed onto the nightstand and managed to steady himself. Â He heard a commotion from their small living room. Â Worried about Cyan, Luke tried to call Mara from her sleep. Â Except he felt so tired, and even though she was a light sleeper, she did not stir.Â With supreme effort, Luke stumbled to his door.

Cyan crashed into a chair, knocking it to the floor and falling along behind it.Â He groaned and flipped onto his back, mashing the top of his head into the soft carpet. Â Luke dropped to his knees beside his friend and helped the dragon right himself again.

"Cyan?Â What's wrong?" Luke asked, his voice emerging as a raspy croak.

"The skin on top of my head," Cyan growled, scratching at the afflicted area with his sharp talons.Â "It itches! Â It feels like someone put glue on it and now it's flaking off, only worse.Â It almost hurts."

"Cyan, stop," Luke said worriedly as the dragon scratched violently at his forehead.Â "Cyan, you just cut yourself, stop it!"

Luke grabbed Cyan by the wrists but the dragon's need to tear at the skin was strong.Â He shrieked and twisted in Luke's grip, accidentally shoving his padmiri against the wall.Â The noise finally woke Mara up. Years of waking up in the middle of combat situations had trained her to come to awareness instantly; she was awake and on her feet in seconds. Â She pulled a housecoat on and jogged into the small living room. Â A quick look at the two gave her momentary pause until she saw Luke. Â She ran to him, he was still slumped against the wall, blinking groggily at Cyan.

"Luke?Â Are you ok? Â What happened?" Mara asked, putting her arm around his shoulders to help him stand.

Luke shook his head and grabbed her arm to stop her. Â His eyes were wide and Mara had the distinct impression that he was seeing something that she wasn't.Â "Look . . ." was all he was able to say.Â Mara followed his gaze and at first couldn't figure out what he was trying to get across.Â Cyan was still scratching violently at his head, groaning in something almost like pain. Â And then she saw



it. The small cut Cyan had made in his own scales was widening, and it seemed that the tissue around it was drying out, cracking before their eyes. Suddenly Cyan arched into a ball, his lithe body straining against nothing. Then he threw his head back and cried a single, clear note that was at first a sound of agony, but slowly a sound of joy. His scales were flung from his head and most of his neck as if they were nothing more than powdered bronze. The strange dryness quickly made its way down his body like some debilitating disease. Dropping to all fours Cyan shook, spraying the scales everywhere like metallic water. For a brief moment neither Luke nor Mara could see Cyan through the sparkling cloud of his own making. Then the powdered bronze settled and Cyan stood tall and proud as a phoenix from the flames.

> <p class="MsoBodyTextIndent2"> Chapter XV<p>

It was everything Leia could do to keep from yawning in boredom. This day they were having their monthly meeting of the Council and the Senate and for some reason the discussion seemed even more mundane than usual. She knew it was because she had far more important things on her mind. But that didn't change the fact that she was dressed in uncomfortable clothing, her braids were pulling, and she was listening to two Senators argue over whose planet had the biggest tauntauns.

Senator Agfa mwq Tago's impassioned speech on the high quality of his world's tauntauns was interrupted when the doors to the Senate Chamber were forcibly shoved open. All eyes turned in varying degrees of surprise and outrage towards the entryway as Luke strode in; his whole manner was that of someone who is so sure of each step he takes he knows it three strides beforehand. But the real gasp came when Cyan sprang in behind him.

Gone was the patchwork of dull bronze scales. His serpentine body was sheathed in shimmering sapphire. They were patterned in all different shapes and sizes all over his body, accenting his smooth lines and well-defined muscle. The colors ranged from midnight blue, to teal, to turquoise and on his belly the scales changed shade to green and then to a greenish yellow. He spread his wings and arched his slender neck; he was well aware of the striking figure he made. The seemingly delicate wing membrane was so thin one could see every blood vessel. His ebony horns curled well past his nose, and his crest was no longer the hard ridge of skin, but was the same almost see through membrane of the wings, yet it was still tough. With every movement the scales clicked together so the whole Senate Chamber resounded with the sound of wind chimes. He moved with the grace of a raptor on the hunt, his whole being displaying all the power at his disposal, and yet it was obvious to everyone there just who was containing that power.

"Now, while I'm sure the heated debate over who has the best tauntauns is an important issue, I have one of an ever so slightly pressing matter," Luke said simply. He and Cyan came to a stop just before reaching the stairs that would take them up to the podium on which the Council sat. "We have come to ask for the assistance of the Council and the Senate one last time."

Brosk Fey'lya's fur bristled in outrage. "Master Skywalker! You cannot just walk in here and make demands of the Council!" In

complete unison Luke and Cyan turned to Fey'lya, their eyes hard and cold, a rumble escaping Cyan's throat. Â Fey'lya stuttered to a stop, his anger popped flat by their expression.

"I will speak, I will be heard, or else you will learn just how much power the Jedi hold," Luke said, his voice soft, but the menace it carried with it pushing it to the farthest corners of the room.

Councilor Blacksky sat up a little straighter in her chair. Â " 'Or else', Master Skywalker?Â That sounds a lot like a threat."

"It is," Cyan responded for his padmiri , a growl finding its way into his words. Â "But not the kind you think."

Luke gave his dragon a little smile at his wording before speaking again. Â "I'm not asking that you go to war. Â I'm just asking for assistance.Â They have taken my son and have information on the Jedi that could hurt or even eradicate us.Â We just want help so we can go into their territory and learn about them so when they come at usâ€"and I can assure you, they willâ€"we will not be caught off guard. Â If we are prepared, than we can avoid a lot more bloodshed, and that is in the interest of us all."

"I am disappointed in you, Master Skywalker," Councilor Blacksky commented. Â "Such an action is harsh and uncalled for. Â I say we open negotiations with them. Â Rumor has it that they have a much better understanding of the medicine of pregnancy and childbirth.Â From what I can understand, that's something that should interest you."

Luke was not the one to answer that.Â He clasped his hands together and brought them to his lips. Â When Leia realized he wasn't going to say anything to Blacksky's comment, she wound herself up for a response. Â This was the kind of thing that could drop a politician's support like a rock.Â But Cyan beat her too it.

Tilting his head and frowning in a cute way, Cyan said, "You ever take a course in people skills?Â I would really recommend it if you were thinking of, oh, say furthering your political career."

The silence after Blacksky's comment was broken as the room broke into scattered laughter and Leia relaxed.Â It was just the way the comment should have been handled. Â If Leia had broken in, as she wanted, they would have started an unrelated debate against Blacksky.Â Cyan not only took away from the instant anger her words had started, but he kept the subject from being changed from his intended topic. Â Yet he still left her words up for future debate which Leia would make sure happened.

"Tell me, Councilor Blacksky, just how long have you been in contact with the Cragon?" Luke asked when he finally looked up.

The Senate Chamber fell silent once more. Â Councilor Blacksky straightened in her chair and asked in as menacing a voice as her slender frame could muster, "Excuse me? Â Could you repeat that?"

"I asked how long you've been in contact with the Cragon," Luke said

with a little shrug. "It's not that complicated a question."

"But how you came to ask it is," Borsk Fey'lya said softly, eating this up. "This meeting would give him ammo for months."

Luke shrugged again and gestured in a broad arc around him. "Outside of this room, who, besides a few select members of the military, even know of the Cragon's existence? Hell, how many know of the Chiss race beside those who studied Grand Admiral Thrawn? Therefore, what rumors could there be about them. Besides, my wife's medical condition is a private matter we have shared only with close friends and family who would not have just spread that news around. The only other people who could possibly know about it are the doctors on the Threnody who delivered our child while we were being tortured for the enjoyment of the Cragon public. And I would say those doctors probably shared that information with their superiors."

"There has been discussion and the sharing of rumors on the Cragon within the Council and the Senate," Blacksky answered easily, but her lies were blatantly true to the three Jedi there. "I guessed at your wife's condition based on speculation from the press on why it was taking her so long to be released from the hospital when she first returned from yours and her ordeal."

"Bull shit," Leia growled suddenly. Everyone turned to her in surprise at her harsh words, and she caught both Luke and Cyan trying to suppress a grin. "Blacksky, I have never once heard any rumors of the Cragon that would even hint at what you suggest, the same with the press. If you haven't been in contact with them, then I'm the heir apparent to Nal Hutta." Leia narrowed her eyes at the Councilor as if she could bore right through to her thoughts. "The only question in my mind is what you're getting out of it?"

"Nothing. I'm getting nothing from the Cragon," Blacksky said with deliberate ease. She settled back into her chair and her eyes lost focus, almost as if she were going to sleep. Leia frowned, wondering what she was doing when she felt a small pressure in the Force, a little niggling at the back of her head. Even before she could discover what it was, Luke and Cyan were reacting. Cyan had jumped up three stairs before Luke could grab the harness holding the tooled leather saddle to his broad back.

"So you're the reason they took it from him," Luke whispered.

Realization hit Leia with a thunderbolt. Han had told her that according to the file they read on the Cragon's Pirde, they needed a host to test whether they could transplant whatever tissue they had taken from Corran to another person. And what person, who grew up in the Rebellion and the New Republic wouldn't want that slim chance to be able to use the Force, to be just as powerful as the Jedi who saved the Universe.

"Now I know the government has been corrupted," Cyan growled. "We will never get your support because it has been bought by those who would destroy us."

"That is a rather serious accusation, dragon," Fey'lya hissed.

"You should be careful who you aim those towards."

Cyan grinned and bared all his teeth, knowing this was a gesture Fey'lya would understand well. "Indeed, and if the accused was deserving of my care, she wouldn't be the accused at all."

Triebakk, the Wookie councilor from Kashyyyk, rumbled something, sounding decidedly displeased. His protocol droid patiently translated, "My Master requests that you be a little more clear about what it is you are accusing, Cyan, and tell us why you say these things about Councilor Blacksky."

"You all know that Captain Corran Horn had a portion of his cerebellum removed while he was being held against his will on Cragon's Pride. This not only destroyed his sight, but took away his ability to use the Force as well. For Captain Horn, though it was not widely known, was a trained Jedi. While we were trying to recover him, Han Solo read a data file that stated that the tissue removed from Captain Horn would be transplanted to someone else. Moments ago, Blacksky used the Force. And if I read Luke's memory correctly, she's actually been tested before and found to have absolutely no talent in the Force whatsoever. Yet now she can use the Force and I can feel a definite part of Captain Horn in her mind," Cyan finished his explanation with a meaningful glare at Blacksky.

The Councilor laughed outright when Cyan finished. "This is preposterous! It is deplorable that the Jedi would stoop so low just to further their own ends. I have been tested, that is true. I was tested in the days when the Jedi stood for truth and justice. It is a sad day for the New Republic for now I can see that which they are supposed to stand for is no longer what they are."

"You know," Leia mused, "I remember stories of the Old Republic. Back before it was corrupted. Back when the Jedi were still a strong presence in the galaxy, their ranks exceeding a thousand fold. In those days, if a Jedi were to walk into the Senate and say a member of the government was lying, they would be believed without question. But as the government became more corrupt, the Jedi were ignored and eventually persecuted. And now, in a time when we are supposed to be moving beyond the wrongs of our predecessors, we are doing exactly as they did. You have all heard the saying, 'if we don't learn from our past, we are doomed to repeat it'. If we do not tread carefully, we will fall into the same trap as the Old Republic and a new Empire, perhaps even worse than before, will emerge from our ashes."

"My brother has fought for his people at risk to his blood, body, and soul and we are repaying him with treachery and the denial of a small favor. Yes, it is a sad day for the New Republic, but not because of the downfall of the Jedi, but because of the downfall of the morals, loyalties, and integrity of this body. We who represent the worlds, workers, soldiers, children, and yes, even the Jedi of this great conglomeration of people."

Leia could see a sudden change in the posture of the Council. To vote against Luke now would mean that they were acting like the corrupt Councilors of the Old Republic, which could put great pressure on them politically. Still she could see indecision in some, many unwilling to undertake action that could very well thrust

them back into another bloody war. "Leia couldn't fault them for that, but how could she make them see that this was necessary?" She looked at Fey'lya, and saw a set of scales in his eyes as he weighed the advantages of going with or against Luke. She looked at Blacksky, hoping for some sign of hope and was disappointed by the calm, collected Duros across from her. She probed the Councilor's mind as gently as she knew how, searching for—and finding—a presence that could only be Corran's. "She also discovered something else." When she pressed a little harder, hard enough that Corran would have had to be really off his game not to notice her probe, Blacksky didn't even give a flicker of acknowledgement. "Interesting."

Luke stepped away from the podium with Cyan obediently following him, their shared flash of anger gone. "I look at you now and I know it could take months for you to come to a consensus, despite the urgency of this matter. This government is becoming too large and unwieldy to make effective decisions and I cannot in good conscience wait for you to. As I told you all before, if you didn't heed us, you would learn how much power we have," Luke finished, his voice soft but with a power behind it that carried it around the room. "And soon you will. When you view the consequences, you can blame Councilor Blacksky. She brought them about."

After he had left Leia sat back in her chair feeling a moments disquiet. "What did this mean?" He wouldn't

"President Organa Solo," Borsk Fey'lya asked with a lazy predatorily lilt to his voice, "I don't supposed you feel like enlightening the Council and the Senate about what this 'consequence' will be?"

"I would if I knew myself," Leia murmured, her eyes drifting over to Councilor Blacksky and then narrowed to slits.Â

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"So . . . how did it go?" Mara asked when Luke and Cyan walked into their apartment.Â  Luke looked up at her and though his smile was halfhearted, there was a light in his eyes she had never seen before.Â  Ever since Cyan finally shed his tattered bronze scales their bond had solidified to become as solid as the sapphire that now incased the dragon's body. Â  This had changed them both but in ways only someone who knew them both closely could see.Â  Cyan had matured and though he retained his impish playfulness, he knew when not to use it and could act with as much elegance, passion and conviction as his padmiri .Â  As for Luke, ever since Cyan was released from the carbonite, Luke had felt a gnawing sense of guilt and self-doubt he had kept hidden from everyone besides Cyan and Mara. Â  Since their joining, Luke was at last able to accept his dragon's firm conviction that Luke could not have stopped or controlled what he did in their brief time apart.

"Well," Luke said after giving her a small peck on the cheek, "I had the pleasure of hearing one of Leia's more elegant speeches, but the Council still refused to give us support.â Oh, and there was one other thing, but I just can't put my finger on it . . ."

"Hmm . . .yes, I believe it was a bit important too . . . wait, I remember, we found out who got Corran's missing brain tissue," Cyan commented in the annoying way they had started finishing each others

thoughts and comments, the one part of the joining Mara could have done without.

Mara gasped. "What? Who? Does this mean he's going to get his sight back and be able to use the Force again?"

"Not likely," Cyan growled with a frustrated snort.

"It's Councilor Blacksky," Luke said, just as frustrated as his dragon. He quickly filled Mara in on their meeting with the Council and the Senate.

Mara pursed her lips in anger. "Bloody hell. What are we going to do with Corran? He's not going to like this at all."

Luke didn't get a chance to answer because Leia suddenly burst in the door and without saying a single word she hugged Luke and Cyan with the enthusiasm of Cyan at feeding time.

"Um . . . you know I love you too, Leia, but what was that for?" Cyan asked, perplexed.

"Because you were both wonderful," Leia answered, practically gushing. All three of them traded worried glances. "No, I'm not insane. You two honestly could not have handled that better."

Cyan frowned. "Yes, we could have. We could have forced Blacksky to have a bio scan so we could prove what she's done."

Leia gave an unconcerned flick of her fingers. "Blacksky has gained a fair amount of power in the council and that means there are all kinds of people who want to take it away from her. And you two have given everyone enough material to work with to last for years. She will be brought to justice in time and I might not even be the one to do it. But meanwhile, we get to destroy her political career while we wait."

"Mildly vindictive, but I like it," Cyan said with a grin.

"Leia, we need to get Corran's brain tissue back as soon as possible," Luke said urgently. "Cilghal is getting really worried about Corran's mental state. I think getting the Force back could be the only way to help him."

"I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this, but if the Jedi start pushing to have part of a Councilor's brain ripped out, it's not going to do much for your popularity," Leia commented sardonically.

Mara shrugged. "Our popularity isn't going to be much of an issue after this."

"Why?" Leia asked, suddenly realizing she was missing something very important.

Luke grinned. "Let's just say the Jedi have agreed as a whole that if the Council would not support us, we would support ourselves."

"You're going to except those offers from all those companies?" Leia

asked, incredulous.

"Among other things," Mara said with a smug grin.

Leia frowned, suddenly deep in somber thought. "Luke tilted his head and tried to gauge what had abruptly brought about her reflections." Then she looked up and though her face was serious, Luke caught an underlying excitement. "Whatever you're going to do, I want to come with you. Help you, but directly."

"What do you mean?" Cyan asked.

"I mean . . ." Leia stopped for a moment, perhaps again considering what she was about to say, the struggle plainly evident on her face. She shook her head and continued, "I mean, join the Jedi. This is so important, and I want to be there to help however I can. What can I do here? Argue with Borsk Fey'lya? That's not going to help you much."

"No," Luke said, firmly shaking his head. "I need you to be here. I need you to be watching Blacksky, I need you to keep pressuring the other Councilors and Senators for their support. I don't know how long we'll be able to keep this up on our own; it might be that we'd need the government's support. If you're not there, I don't think we'll ever get it."

"But—" "

"No, I mean it," Luke said firmly. "I appreciate this, I really do. But your place is here. You can do so much here that no one else can. Please, Leia?"

Leia tried very hard to glare at him, to keep her resolve, but Luke's face had this imploring, hopeful expression that she just couldn't bring herself to crush. "Alright."

Luke grinned but Mara spoke first. "You had no chance, Leia, he used the innocent farm boy look on you. I can't even resist that one most of the time." Leia smiled at that as Mara watched the two siblings closely. Things could be so tense and awkward between them sometimes, but every once in a while they forget to act self-conscious and instead acted like a real family.

"So, seriously," Leia asked after a moment, "what are you guys planning to do?"

Cyan grinned mischievously. "What? And ruin the surprise?"

> <p class="MsoBodyTextIndent2"> Chapter XVI<p>

"Welcome to the 18:00 News on Holo Channel 07.34. For our lead story tonight, we have some stunning news about the Jedi. Over recent weeks, Master Skywalker and President Organa Solo have been pressing for action to be taken concerning the Cragon, a religious group of Chiss located in the Unknown Regions. They have gotten no support, and at his last appearance at a Senate meeting, he not only accused Councilor Blacksky of consorting with the Cragon, he also seemed to give a thinly veiled threat to take action on the government. But as our sources here at Holo Channel 07.34 have

learned, this was not the case at all.

"For a number of days, no one has been able to get in contact with anyone at the Jedi Academy on Yavin IV.Â When this stretched into two weeks, President Organa Solo ordered that someone be sent out to check up on the Jedi.Â When a military vessel reached the moon, they found it deserted. Â The only thing they found was a message from Master Skywalker left on a data pad in his office.

"It reads: 'You wanted to know how much power the Jedi have? Â We have the power of unity over the New Republic. Â You might not understand what that means now, but you will soon. Â Just remember that you all know the very small yet so important thing I asked for.Â When you want us to return, you will know what to do, but it will be under our terms. Â This data pad contains the proper documents for removing our membership from the New Republic.Â It includes every Jedi, and many non-Jedi that help because they understand how important this is. I ordered no one to go; they all come by choice. The Jedi are not interested in ruling the New Republic, but in protecting it, even if it doesn't realize it needs protecting.'

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End  
file.